

Challenging Youth

*Establishing Supportive Relationships with Youth
in South Los Angeles*



Vera Schiepers

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Thesis for acquiring a Master of Arts degree
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Front cover: still from the documentary 'Rize' by David LaChapelle (2005)

Back cover: image from the South Central L.A. Graffiti website¹



¹ http://www.flickr.com/groups/sclagraff/pool/with/6161945252/#photo_6161945252

“We have the belief that we can be somebody... and that we're gonna be somebody. We're gonna... we're gonna rise, no matter what”

Dragon in the documentary *Rize* (David LaChapelle, 2005).

Abstract

Vera Schiepers: Challenging Youth. Establishing Supportive Relationships with Youth in
South Los Angeles

(Under the direction of: Prof. Dr. W. Veugelers)

Working with youth is a particular discipline, especially considering humanist ethical or life counseling. In order to support and empower marginalized youth one might ask which factors are important to establish a supportive relationship. How do professionals connect to the lived experiences and world of disadvantaged youth in order to reach, help, and support them? This is the central research question focused on practitioners working with disenfranchised youth in South Los Angeles.

The study folds into two parts: 1) a theoretical account of published studies regarding adolescent development, the complex reality youth grow up in and factors that appear to be essential in establishing a relationship with teenagers; and 2) a report of empirical data from interviews with professionals who work with youth in a low-income community in Los Angeles and through experiences from volunteer work at the after-school program where these practitioners work.

Both theoretical and practical perspectives illustrate that an integrated viewpoint is crucial to understand the complex reality in which teens construct and negotiate their identities. It is important to take all factors into consideration: from individual psychological aspects of a youth's character, behavior, drives, etc. to the situational or contextual influences on various levels, including race, ethnicity, culture, gender, social class, the family and situation at home, etc. Thus, psychological theories need to be supplemented with socio-cultural perspectives. Together with pedagogical aspects of professional (inter) actions this forms an integrated paradigm. The integrated perspective provides a framework through which one can understand the developmental challenges youth encounter and connect to their lived experiences.

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1. Introduction

During my internship as a humanistic ethical or life counselor in a residential youth care organization for teenagers with complex behavioral disorders – aged ten to eighteen – the importance of connecting to the lived experience and inner-world of youths became obvious. In other words, attuning to their level of understanding and their use of language, i.e. familiarize oneself with their interests and beliefs, and communicate at the level of their intelligence, and the development of their identity. It is important to understand the processes and guiding principles of these teenagers and adolescents, in order to be able to establish a professional relationship with them to reach, support, and help youth. At the University of Humanistic Studies there was spurious information about establishing relationships with disadvantaged youth as an ethical humanist or life counselor, especially regarding identity development. This was the starting point in search of a topic for my thesis.

In the United States of America – hereafter referred to as U.S. – theories are being developed to incorporate popular culture in the schooling system to stimulate literacy development among urban youth. This principle appealed to me and I started to wonder what we could learn from the expertise available in the U.S. Questions arose, such as: can certain theories be useful in understanding and communicating with the lived experience of contemporary inner-city youth? What can we learn from research and expertise present in the U.S.? What will that teach us about the expertise and knowledge already present at the University of Humanistic Studies regarding the identity development and counseling of disadvantaged urban teenagers? How will a study on these topics enrich and enhance my expertise and knowledge? The rich and diverse cultural and ethnic traditions in the U.S. appear to be an interesting field for research and investigation, i.e. ‘melting-pot’ view of Los Angeles.

The U.S. is a considerably different country than the one I spent most of my life and where I attended University. The U.S. social system, political structure, and culture as a whole cannot be compared directly to the Netherlands. Although both countries are considered as ‘the West,’ the social system and safety net in particular, has different political and philosophical foundations in the U.S. than in the Netherlands.

This research, will not elaborate on societal and cultural differences between the U.S. and NL, but will focus on how professionals establish supportive relationships with teenagers. Cultural differences within the U.S. and the Los Angeles region will be reviewed and highlighted. This project investigates how one connects with youth in order to support them,

empower them, and help them to overcome the challenges and obstacles they are confronted with in life.

The subject of this study is closely linked to my personal interests and motivation. The very dynamic, challenging, and vibrant period in life called adolescence has always fascinated me and from my own experiences and examples in my environment during this transformative phase, I realized that significant and supportive relationships or social support systems can have a lasting and positive effect on the path to adulthood. I can only imagine how marginalized urban youth in Los Angeles could potentially benefit from this kind of support. I wanted to gain experience in working with youth in low-income neighborhoods or from troubled homes in Los Angeles to add to the experience of my internship in the Netherlands. Such exposure may lead to finding new methods to add to my knowledge and experience, which in turn will enhance my expertise in the counseling field, and may lead to new theoretical insights.

1.1 Definition of the problem and research objective

The definition of the problem, definitions of key concepts, the objective, and research design of this study will be clarified hereafter.

Main research question

The central questions in this research are:

1. *Which factors are important to establish a supportive relationship with youth?*
2. *How do professionals connect to the lived experience and world of disadvantaged youths living in Los Angeles, in order to reach, help, and support them?*

The focus on establishing relationships in these central questions demonstrates the importance of the relational aspect; however, this is not a purpose in itself. Establishing a relationship is a means and a very important starting point to reach youth and subsequently support, empower, and educate them – depending on the pursued goals and the underlying values.

Conceptualization of terms

Important concepts of this study will hereafter be explained and defined.

1. *Youth/Adolescent/Teen:* these terms are used throughout this study to indicate young people aged 12 to 18. Since the youth served at the practical site in this research are aged 8 to 20, the term ‘youth’ will be used in chapter seven to denote all members of

the after-school program. The terms 'adolescent' and 'teen' will continue to refer to the teenagers aged 12 to 18.

2. *Disadvantaged youth*: children and teenagers growing up in low-income inner-city communities. They are faced with poverty, poor housing conditions, limited resources, (failing) public education, neighborhood violence and/or violence at home, unemployment, etc. A demographic description of South Los Angeles as a low-income inner-city community is provided in chapter six. Other words that are used in this study to describe these youth are 1. Disenfranchised: deprived of power, marginalized; 2. Underserved or at-risk: youth from troubled homes, residing in low-income communities, with few opportunities and resources, and at-risk of spiraling downwards.
3. *Professional*: The term professional, in this study, refers to counselors, case managers, and staff working closely with youth on a day-to-day basis.
4. *Supportive Relationship*: a professional relationship that aims to reach, support, educate, and empower teens. This can be created by caring, listening, being there, offer advice, disclose from own experiences, etc. The main focus is the youth in question. By connecting to his or her lived experiences a professional may be able to support and help youth through the hardships life entails.
5. *Lived experience and world*: Youth's level of understanding and their use of language, their interests and beliefs, their perception on life and the social context surrounding them.

Objective

This study aims to provide practical underpinnings for professionals working with disenfranchised youth. The research goals are:

- To learn from the methods of counselors and other professionals working with disadvantaged youth in a low-income community in Los Angeles and acquire experience from volunteer work with the counseling department of that same agency for a period of six months. Subsequently, this study aims to demonstrate key features and goals to support underserved youth by establishing supporting relationships with them; study the obstacles and challenges these teens are confronted with and have to overcome to emerge into self-sustaining adults with a voice and sufficient self-worth to reach their potential. Moreover, the thesis is intended to articulate a view on

counseling and develop a professional opinion about what should be strived for while working with youth.

- Acquire knowledge by combining a theoretical perspective with daily practices at an after-school program, by conducting research that is founded in hands-on experience. The University for Humanistic Studies upholds and promotes a point of view in which professional skill development and practical training completes the academic education. The practical application of theoretical concepts is highly valued in the training of professionals. This study may enhance the practical based expertise, through evaluating what can be taken home from this experience and what could be added to the methods present in the U.S.
- Furthermore, this study aims to broaden the horizon of the relatively small field of humanistic studies. The University of Humanistic Studies encourages its students to challenge themselves in new contexts and cultures, in order to put the knowledge gained into perspective. In addition, one of the aspirations and objectives of the university is to internationalize – i.e. enrich and enhance – the knowledge and expertise and this research can be viewed in this light as well: supplement knowledge of the university in general and for the occupation of humanistic ethical counseling or educators in particular.

Research design

The study folds into two parts: 1) a theoretical account of a number of studies regarding adolescent development, the complex reality youth grow up in and factors that appear to be essential in establishing a relationship with teenagers; and 2) a report of empirical data gathered through experiences during volunteer work and from interviews with professionals who work with youth in a low-income community in Los Angeles.

Thus, the central topic will be clarified by the reviewed literature and according to the experience of professionals working at a non-profit after-school program, hereafter called Los Angeles Center for Youth (LACY). This is a fictitious name to protect the identity of the professionals who participated in this study. The non-profit agency distinguishes itself by incorporating a humanistic and holistic approach toward its members, their families, and the community at large. Consequently, this after-school program is a very relevant site to conduct research for the University of Humanistic Studies. Several core values correspond to ones upheld at the University of Humanistic Studies, ensuring the relevance of the experience of volunteering there and learning about the youth, the community, and the U.S. society. The

agency, and the counseling department in particular, takes the community, culture, and – extended– family into consideration, in other words they employ a contextual approach. Their mission is to empower youth to take ownership of the quality and direction of their lives. In addition, the counseling department aims to empower the families of the members and the community as a whole so that they can ‘emerge and lift themselves out of poverty.’² Poverty is signified as an influential stressor and cause of many obstacles youth encounter in South Los Angeles. In this respect the mission of the after-school program at LACY and the vision of the University of Humanistic Studies are similar. Both institutes strive to empower people to take ownership of their lives and encourage self-advocacy.

Choice of Literature

The literature that forms the theoretical framework of this research can be roughly divided into three domains: adolescent development theories, contextual perspectives such as studies regarding African American identity and Latino culture, and pedagogical aspects through Critical Pedagogy texts, practical research about working with youth, and studies focusing specifically on Los Angeles metropolitan area.

The criteria, on which the literature was chosen, are a combination of recommendations, search in the UCLA³ library catalogue, referrals from reviewed publications and reports, and theories I had encountered in courses and other studies in my previous years attending university. One criterion in the selection process was my preference of U.S. based studies, focusing on California or Los Angeles if relevant. For instance, African American and Latino culture in California is different from cultural tendencies on the East coast or in the South of the U.S. Since this study is by no means an extensive account on the subject, the listed criteria appeared to suffice. As Jeffs & Smith (2008) argued, thinking begins in what might be a diverging road: it is ambiguous, presents a dilemma, and proposes alternatives. One might argue this is the starting point of creating awareness and that is what this thesis intends.

While selecting the literature to review, the initial focus on the field of critical pedagogy shifted to the background. The reason for this change had to do with the experience at the after-school program in South Los Angeles. The importance of connecting to a youths’ lived experience and establishing a relationship became apparent as a prerequisite of empowering and supporting youth. Thus, establishing empowering relationships became the central theme.

² See interview with respondent 4 and 6 in the Appendix 4: Summary of the Data .

³ University of California Los Angeles.

In order to connect to the world of youth, one has to know what developmental challenges they face and to understand where they are coming from, in order to enhance the possibility to meet them where they are: in their lives, cognitively, emotionally, and developmentally. Subsequently, the impact and influence of social contexts is stressed. In order to establish a relationship, one needs to be able to relate to the other person, understand where he or she is coming from, i.e. the situation at home, school, within the (extended) family, etc. The social and cultural context of a person has to be taken into account. The hypothesis is that a perspective upholding merely psychological theories is insufficient to grasp the complexity of the world youth grow up in. In addition, pedagogical aspects need to supplement the theoretical paradigm derived from psychological and sociological studies.

1.2 Outline of Chapters

The main focus in this study concerns the establishment of supportive relationship with youth and the way a professional can connect to the lived experiences and inner-world of youth. In order to examine this, chapter two *Adolescent Identity Development*, will investigate what this world consists of from a psychological point of view. It tackles the challenges youth are confronted with as they navigate through developmental crises and obstacles, shaping their identities and core values. The demands for optimal development will also be discussed.

Chapter three, *Identity in Contexts*, concerns the social contexts in which youth construct their identity. Besides a sociological perspective on development, this chapter addresses the very important sociological elements Race, Ethnicity, and Culture. This chapter entails a first exploration of challenges teens encounter regarding race and ethnicity. In addition, some of the tasks African American and Latino youth face will be emphasized from a cultural perspective.

The fourth chapter, *Connecting to the Lived Experiences of Youth*, expresses important pedagogical factors for establishing professional and supportive relationships with adolescents. These themes are founded in practical studies. One book in particular will be cited: *Bring Them Back Alive* by Jose De Olivares (2004). This book concerns the author's experience of many years working with disenfranchised teens and offers a structure of pedagogical actions for professionals. Literature from earlier chapters will be incorporated as well. This chapter provides the background against which the empirical data will be analyzed from a psychological, sociological and pedagogical perspective in chapter seven.

Chapter five, *Methodology*, deals with considerations regarding the methodology of this study. It gives an account of the motivation and reasoning behind the selection of the study

sample, the semi-structured interview questions and in which ways the methodological quality of the research has been enhanced.

The sixth chapter, *The Context of South Los Angeles*, focuses on the demographics of South Los Angeles, elucidates the challenges youth face growing up in low-income communities, and describes the non-profit agency where the participants in this study work and where my volunteering experience with the Counseling Department for six months took place.

Chapter seven, *Voices from the Practice*, gives an account of the data collected from the structured interviews: the voices from the respondents interviewed about their experience and expertise on working with youth on a daily basis. Furthermore, the theoretical framework will be linked to the empirical data. This chapter provides the background against which the empirical data will be analyzed from a psychological, sociological and pedagogical perspective.

The eighth and last chapter, *Challenging Youth*, is the conclusion of this thesis. The central question of this research will be posed again and attempted to be answered. Subsequently, this study will be reviewed critically, and recommendations for further research will be provided. On a final note a translation to the field of ethical or life counseling will be expressed. The question what can be learned and taken home from this experience and the expertise present in the Counseling Department of a non-profit after-school program in South Los Angeles will be discussed, from the perspective of a professional humanistic life counselor.

2. Adolescent Identity Development

This chapter centers on the general psychological foundations of identity development, i.e. Erikson's stages of development and Marcia's expansion of this model to identity statuses. Theoretical perspectives on relational youth development and the development of meaning will be highlighted as well. This chapter will demonstrate that the displayed psychological perspectives are insufficient to explain and understand the challenges youth encounter while growing up, especially in low-income communities. Sociological positions that supplement and expand psychological understanding of identity development will be discussed in chapter three.

The book *Understanding Youth* by Nakkula & Toshalis (2006) forms the basic foundation of chapters two and three, since they provide extensive insight and range on traditional and contemporary identity development theories. The authors and theories addressed in the following paragraphs, follow from their studies. This is not an extensive account but merely a representation of different angles worth mentioning. The frequency of citations within the literature of various studies determined the selection below.

2.1 Developmental Stages of Identity

When children develop into adolescents, they progress to a stage of theoretical thinking. Thus, adolescence is the transitional stage in life when a dependent child develops into an independent young person (Kehily, 2007). The process of shaping one's identity can be described as 'a dynamic process of testing, selecting, and integrating self-images and personal ideologies into an integrated and consistent whole' (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006: 20).

It is unimaginable to consider identity development without discussing the work of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. Erikson (1968) indicated humans' need to experience a sense of self within the 'social jungle' of existence in order to feel alive. During adolescence, teens search and discover who they really are and want to be. Adolescents experiment with different roles, adapting to settings, switching positions rapidly, and exploring their potential selves. Although many studies have demonstrated this, adolescents do not tend to this developmental process in a conscious matter.

Stages of Crisis

Erikson's model of developmental stages (1950) described eight stages⁴, from infancy to late adulthood, each centering on a certain crisis that needs to be resolved in order for a person to

⁴ For a complete display of the eight developmental stages by Erikson see appendix 1

be able to progress into subsequent stages. In adolescence, the main task is what Erikson describes in stage five *Identity vs Role Confusion*, i.e. exploring a core sense of self and resolving the issue of role confusion (Erikson, 1950: 261). From age thirteen to nineteen, youth attempt to organize skills, interests, and values into a cohesive identity and apply this to present and future goals. In order to construct a cohesive sense of self, one is confronted by a crisis that has to be resolved. Any form of identity crisis can result from pressure people experience to answer questions such as “Who am I?” and “Who should I be or become?”

Teens are constantly struggling to form their identity and, simultaneously, meet the expectations from their social environments. They are torn between a longing to express themselves as an authentic individual, and a desire to belong and being part of a social group. In other words, adolescents are continuously trying to find a balance between distinction and connection, autonomy and relationships (cf. Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Kehily, 2007; Deutsch, 2008; Veugelers, 2011).

Youth need space and relationships in which identity experimentation will be embraced. Teens who are unable to meet the challenges of experimenting with identities slide into a state of role confusion. When this occurs, adolescents find it difficult to attain self-definition, make decisions and move across multiple contexts (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Erikson stresses the importance of an adolescent ‘moratorium identity development paradigm,’ i.e. a safe place, where adolescents can experiment and explore alternative roles, behaviors, and beliefs, before committing to a sense of self in relation to others and the world.

‘The evidence in young lives of the search for something and somebody to be true to can be seen in a variety of pursuits more or less sanctioned by society. (...) This search is easily misunderstood, and often it is only dimly perceived by the individual himself, because youth, always set to grasp both diversity in principle and principle in diversity, must often test extremes before settling on a considered course. These extremes, particularly in times of ideological confusion and widespread marginality of identity, may include not only rebellious but also deviant, delinquent, and self-destructive tendencies. However, all this can be in the nature of a moratorium, a period of delay in which to test the rock-bottom of some truth before committing the powers of body and mind to a segment of existing (or a coming) order’ (Erikson, 1968: 235-36).

If a teen is fortunate to have a supportive environment in which healthy social experimentation is encouraged, youth will shape a stable sense of self with the ability to bear challenges and flexibility to adjust adequately to the competing expectations of numerous

social contexts (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). The context of an after-school program can provide such a safe environment. This will be discussed in chapter six.

Identity Statuses

The developmental psychologist James Marcia expanded on Erikson's model of adolescent psychological development. Marcia defined identity as a self-structure, as an internally constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history (Marcia, 1980: 159).

In a way, Marcia enriched Erikson's developmental stages by introducing identity statuses, instead of stages. With this distinction, Marcia highlighted a less linear, sequential notion of identity development. Statuses refer to dominant concerns and developmental periods over time, but are not necessarily preceded by another specified status. Consequently, a person can be confronted with the same status multiple times throughout his or her life. It can take possibly years of wavering and hesitating between statuses before a person develops a stable identity (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006).

Marcia described four models of potential responses to the identity crisis in adolescence: foreclosed identity; diffuse identity; identity moratorium; and achieved identity.

A *Foreclosed Identity* is one in which a certain identity is accepted without much exploration and experimentation with alternative identities. This status refers to individuals who have become devoted to occupational and ideological positions, chosen by parents or peers rather than a self-made decision (Marcia, 1980). Thus, the foreclosed individual is mainly an extended representation of other people, and depends on these others for reassurance embedded in a secure environment of family and peers. Opinions motivated externally, repressing any dispositions in conflict with the foreclosed identity. Subsequently, questions or challenges about identity are not considerate or understanding, since such a person lacks tolerance for ambiguity in loyalty. The aspects of foreclosed sense of self that are accepted without careful examination should be brought to the surface before the process of identity formation can begin.

It is important to note that Marcia's theory is founded on the idea that accepting and committing to a foreclosed sense of self, does not necessarily mean one cannot live a life leading to fulfillment of aspirations, etc. He recognizes that a person's identity is often based on unexamined segments of the self that have been internalized without contemplation or critique (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006).

The *Diffuse Identity status* is one of few explorations with or reflections on potential identities. There has not been a crisis or commitment to an identity. ‘Identity Diffusions,’ Marcia elucidates, ‘are young people who have no set of occupational or ideological direction’ (1980: 161). A diffuse identity individual is easily influenced and changes regularly and swiftly between representations or beliefs according to their environment. They are oriented to the outside world, frequently rather impulsive, exceedingly sensitive to context, and vulnerable to the assessments of others (Ibid). The most supportive act in this situation is asking teens about their experiences in different contexts; and listening to their struggles, after which you highlight the examples they speak about with passion. By becoming developmental partners, one assists a diffuse identity in answering questions about who he or she is.

When an adolescent is experiencing an identity crisis without committing to any particular identity, this constitutes an *Identity Moratorium* status. Following Erikson and his concept of ‘moratorium,’ Marcia explains this is the phase in which a teen experiments with various roles, behaviors, relationships, and beliefs, without committing to an identity. Some form of transient commitment will occur, since the search for an authentic self is exhausting and the absence of a cohesive identity nerve-racking. The difference with the previous status is the awareness of experiencing a crisis. Offering adolescents within the identity moratorium state a safe environment to experiment with different roles, beliefs, and behaviors, is significant to create circumstances from which an individual can emerge.

The final response is the *Achieved Identity*, when adolescents have experienced a decision-making phase and have committed to a self-chosen identity (Marcia, 1980). The identity crisis is resolved and the individual has integrated past, present, and future needs and is therefore able to accept the selected sense of self across fluctuating contexts. An achieved identity is accompanied by elevated self-reflection and tolerance for critical remarks and self-judgments. It is not uncommon that achieved identities express their purpose and belonging, as well as the persistence of the self within various environments (Ibid).

The achieved identity status does not signify a completion of developing one’s identity, however, it is an important moment in which the extensive process of constructing a sense of self is concluded. This moment in adolescence is especially memorable since this is the first time a refined identity is formed. Through significant experiences, either joyous or painful, the process of experimenting with various selves and beliefs, and ultimately committing to one, can start all over again.

2.2 Interpersonal Development

Traditionally, the theoretical paradigm regarding the construction of identity has centered on the individual process, separate from the influence significant others, such as family and peers, have on adolescent development.

The authors portrayed in Nakkula & Toshalis' (2006) work on interpersonal development will be supplemented, both for consolidation and enlargement of the theoretical framework. The work of Nancy Deutsch (2008) concerns the contextual study of adolescent lives and identities and deserves to be mentioned specifically. She concentrates on the importance of relationships and the influence of social contexts on adolescent development. The contextual perspectives will be reviewed in the next chapter. Her research was conducted at an after-school program and is, therefore, particularly relevant to this thesis.

Youth and Relationships

The study *Pride in the Projects* suggests that relationships need to be brought to the fore of identity studies because, contrary to stereotypical labels of American teens, youth in this research underline the importance of connection to others (Deutsch, 2008: 42). Deutsch claims human beings may shift aspects of expressing one's identity according to context; however, people maintain an inner and consistent sense of identity. Our relationships and interpersonal interactions are, as she envisions, the 'essential contexts within which we negotiate and balance these self-presentations and internal identities' (2008: 7).

The American philosopher Judith Butler joins the relational position by stating that people are relational subjects and cannot be interpreted as completely separated from one another (Butler, 2006). In the view of psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (1997), the human subject is always assimilating with what is outside the self, and is essentially dependent upon others. A sense of self is constituted reciprocally in relation to the other and by recognizing the otherness of the other. This recognition depends upon negation and action from the other towards the self, incidentally changing the self, making it non-identical (Benjamin, 1997). These perspectives call attention to the importance of relationships for youth development.

The psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan was among the first to demonstrate that the experience of friendship, romantic relations, and other interpersonal involvements outside of primary caretakers, could greatly influence the development and mental health of a person (Sullivan, 1953). With his emphasis on the notion of 'chumship,' Sullivan demonstrated the important implications of having a close friend, a 'chum' (Ibid). The experience of genuine reciprocal friendship can instigate a restructuring of prior commitments to an identity through

learning about someone else's life and experiences, and by sharing one's own. Besides, an adolescent can become aware of his or her own relational possibilities through developing a friendship bond aside from other relational experiences.

The clinical psychologist Robert Selman presented a model of 'interpersonal understanding,' in which he portrays four levels of interpersonal development (Selman, 1980). He drew from Sullivan's notion of chumship as well as the work of Lawrence Kohlberg. The latter designed a model of moral development and Selman expanded on the interpersonal features of morality.

Selman was particularly interested in the process children go through, focusing on their own needs at first, without expressing recognition or interest in others, to finally acknowledging the other's wishes and needs and finding a way to organize and manage those with their own desires and needs. This is exactly the process he described across four levels, starting with the *egocentric* level, through a *unilateral* and subsequently a *reciprocal* understanding of interpersonal interactions, towards the highest level of *mutual* understanding. The latter level can be achieved in adolescence and expresses genuine care and concern for another and involves an understanding of needs and interests that are not one's own and unconditional. Sullivan's concept of chumship corresponds with this notion of mutual interpersonal comprehension. Moreover, the probability of adopting a mutual perspective will increase when the experience of chumship occurs in (pre-) adolescence (Selman, 1980; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006).

Developing Possibilities

Another relational theory focuses on the optimal experience, or flow, of constructing identity. This view concentrates on developing possibilities and creating challenges with opportunities to grow and empower. Csikszentmihalyi & Larson (1984) depict the experience of optimal development, or flow, as the high resulting living at the edge of your capacities for an extended time. It is a deeply gratifying sensation when you are completely focused on mastering a complex task, for instance. In their book *Being Adolescent* they state that it is quite rare to experience this flow (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

Thinking in terms of possibilities offers an alternative frame of reference. It focuses on the positive, on hope. Hope is the strongest and most positive approach to struggling teens. Redirecting adolescents towards possibilities, and refocusing on their strengths and capabilities, allows for a process of co-creation. This, in turn, stimulates skill development and, correspondingly, empowerment. The importance of offering relational support is

completed when opportunities are created in settings that encourage adolescents to take leadership roles and make significant contribution to the community (Ibid). This can be attained through empowerment (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006).

In the research Deutsch conducted at an after-school program on the East coast of the U.S. she found these programs could provide space for youth to develop positive identities. By respecting and recognizing a teen completely, i.e. not judging him or her on first impressions or through social categories based on prejudice, the teen will feel respected, seen, and valued (Deutsch, 2008). Chapter four elaborates on the importance of respect.

2.3 Developing Meaning

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor expresses a view in which human identity is shaped by the core values an individual holds dear. He argues that individuals have a sense of self when they can express or experience a sense of direction within a moral frame of reference, which guides moral decision-making. To know and express what you believe and the values you uphold means you are able to answer the question ‘Who am I?’ (Taylor, 1989). Taylor’s thesis can be understood in Eriksonian and Marcian terms as the commitment to a set of beliefs or notion on existence, that form the foundations of our sense of self after resolving an identity crisis.

Questions about the meaning of life, the purpose of existence, how one should live, why people have to experience grief and suffering, etc. arise during adolescents as part of the development towards adult life. The reason teens are capable of asking such questions has to do with their increasing ability to think in an abstract and theoretical way. This development provides one of the richest, critical, and deeply hopeful worldviews there is, according to Nakkula & Toshalis (2006).

Faith Development

One of the core constituents of cognitive and moral areas within the developmental process is the emergence of ultimate meaning, often in the form of religion or worldview. With increasing theoretical and formal thinking skills, come the reflective abilities in adolescence. This stimulates mutual interpersonal understanding, as explained above, but also the development of meaning or faith. A model of adolescent moral development shows that a youth’s moral frame of reference moves from the domain of the individual (preconventional), towards a societal (conventional), and ultimately a universal framework (postconventional) (Ibid: 207). This corresponds to Selman’s levels of interpersonal understanding. Eventually, adolescents evolve from mutual interpersonal understanding, to the development of a

structure of moral principles and guidelines, resulting in an internally constructed framework that determines a concept of justice.

The developmental psychologist James Fowler (1981) designed a model to describe various stages of faith development. His model moves from a pre-stage marked by the development of basic trust, through the emergence of imagination – and with it the influence of culture, religious institutions, and school – through the next stage, which is enlarged with logical thinking skills between the ages of seven and twelve, towards adolescence.

When adolescents are confronted with contradictory experience that leads to deep reflection on meaning, purpose, and identity, it marks the beginning of the third stage called ‘synthetic-conventional faith’ (Fowler, 1981: 151). Similar to experimenting with different roles, teens in this stage explore various competing ideas and recognize that perspectives are relative. Considering that adolescent’s lived experiences may be incompatible with faith provided by the context they grow up in, the teenagers’ faith transforms so they can conceive themselves, the world, and what they interpret as ultimate, in their own way and possibly different from their environment.

Further stages unfold during adulthood and range from taking responsibility for one’s beliefs and feelings, through a complex understanding what ‘truth’ is, cannot be explained by a single statement, towards faith as a universal principle of love and justice (Ibid: 174-210).

Four Needs for Meaning

In his book *Meanings of Life*, psychologist Roy Baumeister (1991) states that every human being needs his or her life to make sense in a certain way. He described four needs that, when satisfied or pursued, make a person feel life consists of sufficient meaning. If someone is incapable of satisfying one or more of the needs, he or she will feel life lacks meaning. Baumeister articulates that someone experiencing a lack of meaning ‘will be inclined to rethink and possibly restructure his or her life, often including behavioral change, until all four of the needs are satisfied’ (1991: 32). He argues that people with multiple means of giving their life meaning are predictably more resilient. Baumeister provides a framework to comprehend human methods to make sense of life and a tool to analyze a person’s perspective on the meaning of life. The four needs for meaning are: purpose, value (justification), efficacy, and self-worth.

Human beings need to experience direction in their lives and signify their acts in light of *Purpose*. This first need is divided into two categories: goals, i.e. concepts of desirable future circumstances, and fulfillments, which are essentially idealistic notions or ideas for the

future. These help a person structure and interpret current actions in light of the long-term objective. Furthermore, short-term goals are deduced from fulfillments. These goals and fulfillments do not necessarily need to be achieved to lead a meaningful life. Pursuing them without attainment can provide sufficient meaning.

The second need is *Value*, and it centers on the need and desire to justify or legitimate actions. Justification appears to be a requirement for human beings to experience life has positive value (Ibid: 39). Even when people act without a conclusive moral framework, they want to justify their behavior. A basic foundation for moral values is necessary in order for these moral values to provide behavioral guidelines that need no further justification.

Efficacy refers to the experience of being in control, resulting in the feeling of being capable to achieve goals and realize values. The awareness of capability and strength is heightened when challenging goals are accomplished. This corresponds to what Csikszentmihalyi & Larson (1984) describe as ‘living at the edge of your capabilities,’ and their portrayal of optimal development and the satisfaction of meeting challenges. Baumeister underscores a distinction between primary and secondary control (Ibid: 42). Primary control relates to the possibility to adjust the context in order to fit the self; secondary control, in contrast, is adapting the self to suit its surroundings. A key component of secondary control is ‘interpretive control’ (Ibid). This category entails that simply understanding facts of life or social surroundings, offers a sense of control, regardless of a person’s actual possibility to influence or change it.

The final need Baumeister recognizes is *Self-worth*. He states that people need to ‘make sense of their lives in a way that enables them to feel they have positive value’ (Ibid: 44). It is essential to feel respected by others and have a basic sense of self-respect.

2.4 Critical Considerations

This chapter has covered several theoretical notions on adolescent identity development and key aspects of it. Erikson and Marcia provide insights in the process of identity development, signifying adolescence as overcoming a crisis that arises from conflicting identities and roles across multiple settings. They also stress the importance of safe spaces for youth to experiment and struggle with various identities, and eventually commit to one.

Deutsch, Sullivan, and Selman emphasize the fact that people are constructed within social settings and underscore that – supportive – relationships are of paramount importance. The study by Csikszentmihalyi & Larson suggests the power that lies in focusing on possibilities, on developing skills, and eventually encouraging empowerment of youth.

The work of Fowler demonstrates that faith and meaning are important issues youth are already actively concerned with. They are in search of a frame of reference to define who they are, what is important to them, how they want to live and what motivates them. Baumeister argued that people have four needs for meaning: they need to experience that their life has direction and purpose; they need to feel their life has positive value and is (morally) justifiable; people need to have a sense of control or efficacy; and they have a need to feel respected and experience a sense of self-worth. These four needs form an interesting frame of reference to understand the search of adolescents in giving meaning to their lives.

All the aforementioned perspectives focus on the individual. Psychological approaches, centering on concepts such as perception, cognition, emotion, motivation, and interpersonal relationships, among others, need to be supplemented with sociological perspectives to describe youth as a whole, and in context. It is a fact that psychological perspectives are not sufficient to understand and explain the complex reality in which youth evolve. The sociological approach examines the influences of society regarding social class, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. As Deutsch argues, it is essential to acknowledge the influence of social context on the process of constructing identity. Combining self and context in a theoretical paradigm is crucial, since people strive for a coherent sense of self, within the variety of contexts.

Furthermore, the foundations on which the theories are based seem to preserve optimism, i.e. view the world from an optimistic standpoint. The alternative viewpoint is usually not considered. For instance, what happens if the first developmental stages cannot be worked through due to negative forces or unfavorable circumstances? What happens when an infant is unable to develop basic trust, which forms the basis of nearly every developmental theory? The presupposition appears to be that the social environment or significant situations do not pose any additional developmental challenges or obstacles. It is implicitly assumed that everyone is given the same opportunities to engage in a healthy developmental process. The effect of contextual influences such as poverty, cultural, racial and ethnic dimensions, lack of parenting skills, etc. all have an impact on the construction of identity. The individual is embedded in a socio-cultural environment and the theoretical paradigm should do justice to the complexity of human existence.

The next chapter will elaborate on the sociological perspective or contextual interpretation on identity development. This will supplement and enlarge the theoretical framework of this.

3. Identity in Contexts

In this chapter, a sociological perspective will be presented. Topics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and culture are visited in addition to contextual perspectives in general.

3.1 Why Contexts Matters

Adolescent development is increasingly interpreted as social construction, in contrast to traditional notions focused on the individual (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Kehily, 2007; Deutsch, 2008). Social construction implies a process in which the focus on individual development is combined with the social contexts teens live in. Supplementing the more traditional perspectives previously reviewed with interactions and influences of social contexts, provides enhanced accuracy on the account of adolescent identity development, demonstrated by multiple authors and studies, across various scientific fields. Accordingly, a sociological perspective needs to be incorporated in this study, in addition to the psychological aspects regarding youth development described in the preceding chapter.

The way other people perceive and see us has great influence on our self-perception. The influence of social contexts, social class, gender, race, ethnicity, and culture becomes apparent when Deutsch (2008) expresses identity development in terms of negotiation with one's surroundings, i.e. negotiating with contexts and interpretations of these contexts in order to build one's sense of self. Her position is based on the theory of contextual interactionism (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theoretical paradigm contains an ecological model of human development. This model illustrates the affects of social contexts on teens at various levels, ranging from the individual to the society at large.

Deutsch (2008) uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model as a foundation to conceptualize the various levels of the environment of a youth as a dynamic and interconnected system of relationships. The microlevel centers on the direct contexts of people wherein one acts and operates each day. The individual has an immediate and actively involvement in a reciprocal exchange between individual and system. Additionally, the systems at this level relate and interact with each other, forming new connections. These connections evolve into their own setting, called the mesosystems. The mesolevel concerns the influence of relationships or settings that are especially 'close to home' and personal, e.g. influences from interactions with parents, teachers, and peers.

The next level is the exosystem. Individuals are not immediately involved but the context still influences one's development. The exosystem constitutes of settings in which important persons, such as parents, are involved and indirectly affects the adolescents' life. A parent's

work place provides the classic example. The final, overarching system is the macro system. The society at large, the fundament to all levels of human development, is the macrosystem. People are influenced by the large context of society, its laws, customs, resources and cultural values. The other levels are embedded in this level. Public policy, the educational system, the rules and regulations of the neighborhood, all influence teens growing up. People are not merely passive commodities of cultural and societal influences. As the concept ‘contextual interactionism’ suggests, humans actively contribute to the cultural influences, as much as they are shaped by the culture they live in.

Culturally constructed norms and values, as well as racial and ethnic notions embedded in society, have a significant effect on the development of youth. Theorists speak of an intersection of influences: race, ethnicity, culture, gender, class, etc. (Vargas, 2006; Deutsch, 2008).

The social context surrounding a youth, defines much of behaviors, beliefs, and a teen’s identity. Gender identity and its development are also connected to the social construction and influence the process of shaping a sense of self. The American feminist, ethicist, and psychologist Carol Gilligan developed a theory on female identity in contrast to more rational and cognitive models presented by traditional developmental thinkers. She labeled this ‘ethic of care’ (1993). In this work she demonstrated that the fundamentals on which women make moral decisions: meaningful interpersonal connections, as opposed to more abstract principles of justice and objectivity that seem to be leading for males (Ibid).

Gilligan further shows that girls do not experience a moratorium during adolescence, the way Erikson described it. Girls go through a process of refinement, based on socially accepted ways to live as a woman. Female adolescents are taught, perhaps unconsciously, to become what her social context expects of her. However, when girls are provided with a safe space wherein they are collectively encouraged to resist oppression in a healthy fashion, they can explore who they want to be for themselves (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). The socialization process of boys also consists of categories associated with gender, e.g. masculinity is linked to toughness and independence, with no room for sensitivity.

Notions on the gendered self recognize the power of societal views on masculinity and femininity, and the influence of these concepts on the process of forming an identity. The influence of race, ethnicity, and culture for adolescent development will be elaborated on in subsequent paragraphs. The population at the after-school program that provides practical data for this study is predominantly Latino and African American. Understanding the cultural surroundings in which most of these youth grow up requires investigating and learning about

the cultural values and customs of the community. It is a first exploration of these cultures and should in no way be perceived as extensive or complete.

3.2 Racial and Ethnic Identity Development

As stated above, the way other people see us has a great influence on the way we perceive ourselves. This can either be positive or negative. The American history regarding immigration and racial diversity provides external identity indicators such as race and ethnicity as significant part of US society:

‘In U.S. society, race is a fundamental organizing principle, a way of knowing and interpreting the social world. As we watch the videotape of Rodney King being beaten up by Los Angeles police officers; compare real estate prices in different metropolitan area neighborhoods; select a radio channel to enjoy while we drive to work; size up a potential client, customer, neighbor, or teacher; or carry out a thousand other normal task, we are compelled to think racially, to use the racial categories and meaning systems into which we have been socialized’ (Smith and Feagin, 1995: 31).

Race is an essential part of social interactions and their contexts, and can be understood as a social construction (Ibid: 4). It functions as a segregating factor, created to distinguish and divide people and establishing power relations in the process. Its influence is not intrinsically negative. Differentiation is in fact essential for human beings. People need to categorize and distinguish based on altering factors in order to make sense of the world they live in.

Differentiation offers a framework to interpret, understand, and give meaning to events, experiences, and social interactions. As long as people are aware of prejudices they may have based on these distinctions, there is nothing to worry about. When power relations based on differentiation result in negative labeling of people belonging to one or more minority groups and discrimination becomes a reality, than categorizing and differentiating can have a very negative impact.

According to Nakkula & Toshalis (2006), contemporary U.S. society remains based on racial classifications that differentiate the White norm from “other” people of color and therefore, attributes value to White European American cultural patterns. The experience of marginalization and discrimination resonates at the deepest levels of people’s core and profoundly influences the way they relate to the world and others around them. Studies demonstrate that the effects of discrimination are connected to ‘depression, anxiety, anger, lowered self-esteem, reduced academic expectations and goals, and risky health behaviors for

minority youth' (Villarrual, 2009: 123). Youth construct their identity not just on notions of what and who they are, but also want to be left alone. They develop their sense of self in part by what they are not. Perceptions of what is considered the norm at the macro level and interactions at the interpersonal level have a deep and lasting impact on how people perceive themselves and shape their self-concepts. Different systems and levels interact and influence each other as illustrated by the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Youth rely heavily on the perception of others to define themselves. They may integrate negative stereotypes, ascribed by their social contexts, into their own self-definitions. For youth growing up at the intersection of marginalized social categories, the task of developing an identity poses additional challenges to those confronted by their 'majority' peers. For such teens, identity development and integration of different views requires negotiating other's perceptions of them. Those opinions may not accurately represent who they are. This demands an ability of the adolescent to balance understanding of these negative labels with strategies to resist them (Deutsch, 2008). Being part of a marginalized minority group often results in sources of stress as a result of 'real or perceived barriers to success in mainstream society (...) Structural impediments include reduced access to personal, social, and economic resources, such as advanced education' (Villarrual, 2009: 123).

Building trusting relationships with supportive others can be of great importance for youth operating within the differences between their own relatedness to social categories and the stereotypes assigned to them by others. Especially positive role models are recommended for minority youth shaping their identities since they offer alternative models of identity (Deutsch, 2008).

Race-Ethnicity-Culture

Race, ethnicity, and culture are three concepts that overlap in some areas yet refer to slightly different aspects and lead to distinct developmental tasks and challenges.

The difference between culture and ethnicity is not entirely agreed upon by theorists. Some suggest that culture is the ideological element of people that guides and motivates behavior. The cultural aspects are expressed both in material phenomena, e.g. a statue of a Saint, and social spectacles such as pilgrimages to certain holy sites. Culture is transferred across generations, often in altered shape over time, and entails explicit meanings such as values, attitudes, worldviews, and self-views. These meanings construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct actions and events (Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999).

Ethnicity in this perspective is a sociological difference referring to specific social groups in multifaceted societies. The distinction is based on a range of common cultural content and on foundations of social positions and considerations of an economic and political nature (Ibid). This view seems most commonly used in the literature of this study and is therefore the definition at hand.

The characteristics that distinguish race from ethnicity are:

Race	Ethnicity
Defines group member's position in a societal hierarchy	Does not define a definite place in a societal hierarchy
Is not mutable, for most people	Is mutable for all people
Does not define a single culture	Defines a single culture
Implies knowledge of racism and own-group racial stereotypes	Implies knowledge of own-group culture
Determined by law and custom	Determined by in-group desires
Lasts across generations, for most people	For most people, virtually disappears after three generations
Can generally be recognized by out-group members	Can rarely be recognized by out-group members
Does not require the person to do anything to belong	Requires some familiarity with group's culture to belong
Does not require infusion of immigrants or visits to homeland to persist	Requires an ongoing infusion of immigrants or sojourns to a homeland to persist.

(Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006: 152.)

This table explicates that while there are some conspicuous resemblances between the social categories race and ethnicity, they are not similar and do not refer to comparable developmental challenges.

3.3 African American and Latino Ethnicity

The two ethnicities singled out are African American and Latino. The paragraph on African American ethnicity will focus more on the developmental and historical aspect; the paragraph on Latino ethnicity will elucidate more on the culture, core values, and the differences with the White Anglo Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture. There are many apparent differences between African Americans and Latino Americans; however, Brian Behnken (2011) has stated that these ethnic groups share similar histories in Los Angeles. He reports that both communities at one point have dealt with segregation and discrimination from the white population, i.e. they were excluded from jobs, housing, and education.

Both African Americans and Latinos have had difficulties in overcoming 'the cycle of racial polarization and fragmentation' (Behnken, 2011: 277). Although they shared these

experiences and challenges that resulted in the occasional effort for interracial solidarity, frequent periods of tensions between the two groups have occurred (Ibid). The tension and distrust of one another derived mainly from a competition on the job market (Vargas, 2009; Behnken, 2011).

African American Identity

African American identity development, also referred to as Black identity, is grounded in the deep Black-White binary, caused by the divide between ‘People of Color’ and ‘White people’ and the history of slavery that still haunts the U.S. society and its citizens. Especially African Americans are – sometimes painfully – reminded of this racial gap. The impact of race on the development of identity has been included in a number of studies. These expanded the work of Erikson and Marcia to incorporate crises and commitments that have to do with various responses to racial experiences in life.

Developmental Challenges

There are many barriers and obstacles that African American teens have to face and deal with while growing up and try to make sense of life. A challenge African Americans encounter is shaping their self-concept while being influenced by stigmas and stereotypical expectations of others. Various theorists refer to this as ‘stigma management’ (Deutsch, 2008). Studies on African American identity in light of stigma management suggest that Blacks choose to present an identity in response to stigma and they adjust their behavior to expected stereotypes while interacting with the White world (Ibid: 100). The recognition of others’ perceptions and stereotypes of them is also expressed in the analysis of ‘double consciousness’ (Smith & Feagin, 1995). This notion describes a basic tension within African American self-perception that is constructed by unavoidable and agonizing attitudes and prejudices of white culture that are present within Black identity (Ibid: 46).

Subsequently, African American adolescents cannot avoid dealing with the black-white racial dynamics within U.S. society. Black teens have to come to terms with their racial identity. This process includes a desire to conform to White racial norms at one point, through over-identification of Black identity against the dominant White norms, towards an integrated identity in which Blackness is accepted within the society’s racial dynamics.⁵

Furthermore, African Americans are confronted with other hardships as well: poverty, joblessness, segregation, neighborhood violence, etc. Youth growing up in low-income

⁵See Appendix 2 for a complete account of African American identity development.

communities observe how hard it is for African Americans to find a job and if one is fortunate enough to find one, obtaining salary raises has proven to be difficult. Besides, having a job does not mean that they can provide a living for their family. Increasing amounts of people living in low-income neighborhoods work hard every day but are still not certain of financial stability in life (Vargas, 2006). It is within these conditions that African American teens have the exceptional hard task of developing an identity.

Coping Strategies

How African American students cope with developmental challenges is investigated through their attitudes towards learning. The approach of African American boys, aged fourteen to sixteen, towards learning is strongly related to experienced levels of environmental stress, i.e. poverty, violence in the neighborhood, etc. The effect of these experienced stress levels actually outweighs other factors in predicting learning attitudes, such as engaging in risky behavior or impulsive 'acting-out' conducts as a reactive coping style (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006: 252).

Another result of this study concerns African American girls of similar age. Black girls who perceive themselves as unpopular have a tendency towards a worse approach to learning than girls who feel they are more popular or feel they belong to a certain group of friends. Interestingly it seems as though gender stereotypes within society resurface here. Boys are affected more by contexts concerning economic circumstances and violence; girls react more to social peer interactions and their position within a group or community.

A very distinctive and unique coping mechanism amongst African American men is argued by Majors & Billson in their book 'Cool Pose' (1992). This mechanism or strategy of survival has been developed as a reaction to centuries of oppression and social isolation in the U.S. society. Presenting a cool attitude, or a Cool Pose, equips African American males with a sense of control, inner strength, balance, stability, confidence, and security. As Major & Billson state, playing it cool helps a black male to maintain a balance between his inner life and his social context.

According to the statistics, it is a clear disadvantage to be born African American and male in U.S. society; they have higher rates compared to White males of: unemployment, poverty, mental disorders, injuries, infant mortality, morbidity, AIDS, homicide and suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, imprisonment, and criminality; in addition, African Americans have a lower income, poorer life-expectancy, less access to health care, and education (Ibid: 12). These problems can be labeled social symptoms as a result of centuries of oppression.

Because of this history, African Americans struggle more than other minority groups and constantly have to overcome racial barriers (Majors & Billson, 1992; Vargas, 2006). Cool pose is a survival strategy that helps the African American men to manage feelings of anger and fury regarding discrimination and prejudice. Although cool pose is a response to stress, it also contributes to stress (Majors & Billson, 1992: 24).

In spite of poverty and the obvious obstacles facing them, most Black males want to raise and provide for a family. This is a masculine goal in the African American community and a statement to declare one's manhood. Sexual promiscuity and procreation is a way to display their masculinity (Ibid: 16). Unfortunately, promiscuous sexual behavior leads to high teenage pregnancy rates and consequences of teen pregnancy and promiscuity has potentially devastating effects on African American females leading to conflicts between males and females and different forms of abuse (Ibid: 17).

Considering all aspects of behavior associated with cool pose, Majors and Billson conclude that this coping strategy enhances social competence, pride, dignity, self-esteem, respect, and masculinity. Simultaneously, this posture expresses the bitterness, rage, and distrust African Americans have towards the dominant society, stemming from years of hostile mistreatment. Cool pose is considered a creative strategy within this context, developed by Black men to 'counter the negative forces in their lives' (Ibid: 105).

Latino Culture

The term *Latino* refers to people who originate from a broad scope of ethnic groups and diverse cultural traditions. Albeit with many differences, the term denotes people with ethnic and cultural heritage from Mexico, Central America, and South America (also known as Latin America). In the County of Los Angeles most Latinos/as have Mexican ancestors and heritage. In this study the term Latino/a will be maintained.

Acculturation, Enculturation, and Cultural Adaptation

A main characteristic of Latinos is acculturation. This term refers to the cultural changes stemming from continuous exchange between distinctive cultures. The process of acculturation refers to the incorporation of the cultural context one lives in; enculturation regards the adaptation toward the culture of one's heritage. Youth have to combine the dual process of acculturation and enculturation is referred to as 'cultural adaptation' (Villarrual, 2009: 115).

Several studies imply that the connection between cultural adaptation and depression is based on stressors that children and adolescents face while interacting within different

cultural and ethnic contexts. Youth have to negotiate within the mainstream culture they live in and the Latino culture of their family. They encounter challenges while weaving through the different cultural frames, overcoming its divide and developing this into a unique and subjective framework of values and beliefs. Research on this topic has shown that there is a link between acculturation and problem behavior. During adolescents this may lead to conduct problems, juvenile arrest, peer delinquency, and gang involvement (Ibid: 118).

Collectiveness: family and community

There are some cultural differences between Latino American and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant American customs and values that are worth mentioning. Generally speaking, White Americans are mostly concerned with themselves and their individualistic lifestyles. Latinos, on the contrary, are profoundly oriented toward family and its central role. The majority is fully engaged with their family and community contexts (Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999). Therefore, collectiveness is a main characteristic of Latino culture.

According to Villarrual et.al. (2009), three cultural values stand out when it comes to Latinos: *familism*, *respeto*, and *educación*. The first, *familism*, refers to a cluster of beliefs underlining the importance of solidarity, obligation, reciprocity, and parental authority within the family; the second, *respeto*, stresses ‘proper demeanor’ and respect for authorities and elders; the third, *educación*, concerns a set of views and practices focusing on moral education and being a good person (Ibid: 155). These three values combined produce a framework of cultural beliefs which forms the basis of proper behavior within families, parenting practices, and social adaptation objectives for Latino kids.

Familism appears to be at the center of these values. It is associated with the principle that one should always behave in a manner that will not reflect negatively on one’s family. A number of studies have suggested that core values related to *familism* are significant for the development of youth. Family bonds and parental authority are important for optimal growth and enable youth to cope with the various challenges life confronts them with, including those related to low-income status. Research shows that youth with greater *familism* values ‘have lower levels of externalizing behaviors, deviance, alcohol and substance use, and violence’ (Ibid: 120). The reason is that youth want to protect the honor of their family and prevent bringing *vergüenza* (shame) to them. Family values are important to Latino families, both nuclear and extended. Additionally, the hierarchy within the family is prominent in Latino culture. The oldest male adult dominates and power positions are structured according to age and gender (Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999: 17).

Another characteristic has to do with parenting practices. Research has shown that Latino parents have different child-rearing values and practices than other ethnic groups. The following table displays an example of these differences in parental expectations from their children regarding interpersonal behavior at home and at school:

Example:	Latino mothers/parents	Anglo-American mothers/parents
Preferences in a child:	A quiet child who seeks closeness; kids who are obedient, follow rules, and conform at school.	An active child, who is independent, verbally expressive, and self-directed.
Terms used to describe behavior:	Relatedness, respectfulness, and affection	Autonomy, personal development, and self-control
Importance of cognitive skills:	Non-cognitive social skills considered as important or more important than cognitive skills	Cognitive skills more important.
Methods used teaching kids:	More modeling, visual cues, and directives	More verbal inquiry and praise

(Derived from a section in Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999: 49)

Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality are another key component of Latino culture. The dominant religions are Catholicism and forms of indigenous cults with healing rites and a central place for spirits. The traditions and rites present in Latino culture are symbolic and cultural expressions of spirituality. A common spirit-medium faith is *espiritismo* in which healing sessions take place in groups that mediate the person suffering from illness and envision many spirits of the dead. The spirits that attend Mexican spiritual sessions are mostly folk saints (Ibid). The *espiritismo*-healing traditions demonstrate the Latino worldview and self-view in which beings from the spirit world have an important influence on human life.

Furthermore, Latinos are cautious towards conventional medicine, there rests a stigma on medications. For example, when a doctor subscribes pills, they are hesitant to take them. In order for Latinos to submit to subscriptions of pills a serious diagnosis is necessary. Latinos believe that herbs and other naturalistic approaches work best and will more often than not use herbal medicine in addition to conventional subscriptions.

Religion and spirituality function differently in the U.S. and Latin America. In the U.S. it provides a way for Latinos to express themselves as members of a certain ethnic group. The terms *Popular Religiosity* and *Communitarian Spirituality* (Ibid: 51) are used to describe the different roles religion and spirituality can play. Popular Religiosity offers a community's

affirmation of itself and Communitarian Spirituality reaffirms social ties within a certain ethnic community. The latter is the role spirituality plays for Latinos in the U.S.

Religion and spirituality are an important part of culture; and for Latinos it appears essential. Youth are socialized through parental modeling of a particular form of spirituality, traditions and customs. Latino youth have to handle their parent's notion of the proper upbringing for children embedded in dissimilar experiences and, at the same time, cope with conflicting cultural issues between themselves and their peers from the dominant-culture.

On a final note, stereotypes of Latinos regularly encompass assumptions that Latino youth are academically incompetent and that Latino boys have a tendency toward violence and delinquency that perhaps cause a form of discrimination that is more explicit (Villarrual, 2009). In contrast, there is an increasing body of research that supports the idea of a relation between the resilience of youth and their development of skills to interact effectively within mainstream *and* ethnic settings. This ability is called 'cultural frame-switching' (Ibid: 126). For youth growing up in multi-cultural contexts it is essential to develop the ability to negotiate, interact, and incorporate various aspects of these different cultural settings. Cultural frame switching is a skill developed more highly in bicultural people. This permits them to manage and cope with an expanded range of multi-culturally loaded situations.

3.4 Integrated Perspective

The literature reviewed in this chapter and the previous one offers a theoretical paradigm, in which on the one hand the individual-psychological paradigm, and on the other hand socio-cultural perspectives are combined. It is important to note that the studies and viewpoints discussed above reaffirm that identity development is more than the measurement of stages and outcomes. Experiences and identities are constructed within a confluence of multiple social categories in which social positioning is determined (Deutsch, 2008).

The model of contextual interactionism illustrates that systems influence individuals and society on four different levels and consequently, this enhances the models presented by Erikson and Marcia. Moreover, racial and ethnic identity development, as well as culture and gender, are social categories that should be considered as influential in developmental processes.

4. Connecting to the Lived Experiences of Youth

This chapter serves as a summary and conclusion of the previous chapters and it emphasizes the important pedagogical factors in establishing a professional relationship with youth. In other words, it concerns the pedagogical aspects, i.e. practical applications of the theoretical perspectives mentioned above. Many of the conclusions and factors appear to be common sense but unfortunately not common practice. In addition, this chapter offers a bridge to the empirical section of this study.

4.1 Pedagogical Aspects

One of the authors presented is Jose De Olivares. He lived through many hardships in his youth and was fortunate to have caring adults around to help straighten out his life. Drawing from that experience, he has devoted his life to helping other adolescents within various fields of work. He shares his observations and his experiences in his book *Bring Them Back Alive* (2004).

It is important to note that relationships are a means not an end. The purpose of establishing relationships is not the relationship in itself; the relationship is a method or a tool to reach, help and support youth towards a self-sustaining adult life.

Care and Timing

One of the first topics De Olivares identifies as crucial in establishing a nonthreatening relationship is showing teens that you care. This is not something a person can imitate easily; youth are aware when an adult does not genuinely care about them. Teenagers in particular are suspicious of others who try to help them and will be apprehensive of any advice given, or motives for supporting them, when they sense others are only pretending to care. Especially disadvantaged youth are all too familiar with adults who do not care.

Demonstrating teens that you care has to do with timing according to De Olivares (2004). Adolescents require attention and assistance instantly. They have not yet developed patience, how to determine priorities, or to consider the needs of others, in other words, they have not developed a good sense of time. Therefore, any problem that might occur results in a crisis or in need of immediate consideration and cannot be attended to when it is convenient for you. This is what De Olivares means regarding the notion of timing.

The constant state of urgency teens experience creates opportunities for adults to demonstrate and prove they care and simultaneously instill youth how to care about others by acknowledging teenagers' needs when they articulate them, have patience and create time

and space to talk to them, help them determine priorities, and make them aware of your needs (De Olivares, 2004: 60). This process corresponds with the levels of ‘interpersonal understanding’ as described by Selman (1980). By demonstrating that you care and thus supporting adolescents’ growth, teens can develop a reciprocal comprehension of human interactions and attain the ability to reach mutual interpersonal understanding.

Adolescents are fully aware of the unconventional decision they make that separate them from conventional authoritative people. It takes great courage for a teen to become his or her own person and boldness to express and show that self to the world. When adults ask – with genuine curiosity and care – why an adolescent decides in favor of a certain image or lifestyle, they will find that teens want to talk about their reasons and choices (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006).

Accountability, Respect, and Consistency

In order to hold youth accountable⁶, they have to know what is expected of them and receive feedback on how well those expectations are being met on a regular basis (De Olivares, 2004). It is crucial to compliment teens when they meet the expectations and confront them when they fail in this respect. Adolescents have to be held accountable for their actions; not confronting unacceptable or inappropriate behavior means you tolerate it. This has damaging implications on an adolescent since it demonstrates a lack of care about what happens to him or her. Thus, in order to hold youth accountable, expectations must be clearly voiced and stated, the consequences for not meeting those expectations need to be known, and teens need to hear when they are not doing well in meeting what is expected of them (Ibid: 64).

The second important factor is respect. In order to earn the respect of teenagers – especially the ones from the streets – you have to treat them with respect. Respect requires a mutual and bidirectional approach. In order to express and earn respect one has to be willing to appreciate and listen to the other person one is interacting with (Deutsch, 2008: 48). To treat youth with respect means acknowledging them whenever you make eye contact; smile, say ‘Hi,’ comment on something they are wearing, etc. (De Olivares, 2004: 68).

Recognizing teenagers as human beings when it is not essential to distinguish them earns you a portion of their respect. Correspondingly, it is important not to look away without acknowledgement when you have made eye contact. Do not expect that they will start social

⁶Accountability refers to the state of being accountable, in particular to accept responsibility or account for one’s actions. The Dutch word “verantwoordelijkheid” is translated in this context as ‘accountability,’ not ‘responsibility.’

interaction. When you know the names of the youth you work with it enhances respectful interaction.

Another important component according to De Olivares is to walk over to the adolescents before starting a conversation, especially when they are going to be confronted or corrected on their behavior. Moreover, always start a conversation in a positive way by addressing them first, begin for example with 'Excuse me' or ask them about their day (Ibid).

Respect for authority is an important form of respect and is heightened by simultaneously demonstrating it as well as receiving it. The importance of understanding and respecting legitimate authority is not to be undermined by the previous statement. Youth just listen better and act less challenging when they feel respected in return. According to Deutsch, resistance to unidirectional respect has to be interpreted within a cultural-historical framework in U.S. society upheld by African Americans and other minorities, since the heritage of slavery and the continued predicament of racism have contributed to an understanding of one-sided respect as the complete opposite to the need of self-dignity (Ibid: 51). Thus, respect is closely linked to the development of a positive and dignified self-concept and the part relationships with supportive others play within the process of shaping an affirmative identity. This matches Baumeister's (1991) argument that feeling respected by others is essential for a foundation of self-worth and ultimately, meaning (see paragraph 2.3).

A third element De Olivares suggests is consistency (2004: 75). In combination with holding youth accountable and treating them with respect, consistency is essential to make it work. For example, if more than one person works or deals with the same teen, they all have to treat the teen equally with respect and holding him or her accountable for his or her behavior. Enforce consequences when necessary, compliment when applicable. That is what consistency entails. Furthermore, consistency means that you must keep trying, maintain to be a role model, and remain a nonthreatening adult.

Responsibility does not necessarily involve mutuality, although supportive relationships can enhance this. Research suggests an increased sense of responsibility with youth who have strong attachments to family and community (Deutsch, 2008: 55). This should have particular implications for Latino youth since their culture is much more oriented towards family and community. Assigning responsibilities to teens and giving them rewards can encourage responsibility and respect from teens. Evaluations of programs for inner-city youth have recognized respect and trust as fundamental factors for optimal interactions and successful organizations (Ibid: 186).

On a final note, De Olivares emphasizes to address punishment in the third person while imposing consequences, e.g. say “If you keep that up you are going to get yourself in a lot of trouble,” not, “If you don’t stop that right now I’ll call the cops” (De Olivares, 2004: 79). The reason that this is important is: 1) it is a confirmation of your nonthreatening nature and 2) it creates space to impose consequences for street behavior (Ibid). The latter, imposing consequences for street behavior, indicates the risks that follow when breaking the law while assigning responsibility for the consequences to the adolescents themselves. This offers teens a choice. Facilitating a safe environment where youth can construct their own identities and negotiate their own decisions encourages them to find their own direction and voice. It empowers them and gives them an opportunity to emerge from their situations.

Safety and Trust

Clinical Professor of Psychology, Judith Herman, wrote a book specifically on healing relationships for people who have experienced trauma (1997). Safety and trust are crucial concepts in her work. Because youth are vulnerable, especially those growing up in low-income communities, safety and trust are very important elements in ascertaining relationships with adolescents.

Creating a safe or secure environment is closely related to building trust. It also refers to the actual surroundings, for instance an office. When an office is a warm and welcoming space it enhances the impression of safety. In addition, understanding the terms of the relationship and letting teens know what you are responsible for – what advice a teen can expect – increases trust and safety. Moreover, it helps to get to know each other, ask teens questions and disclose appropriate and relevant information. Another important component to establishing safety is respecting a person’s autonomy and make him or her feel in control of the situation (Herman, 1997). Baumeister (1991) confirms this in his model of needs for meaning with the need for efficacy (see paragraph 2.3).

Trust in relationships is crucial and closely connected to respectful interactions between youth and adults mentioned in the previous section. Positive reinforcement and appraisal, e.g. encouraging remarks and expressions of appreciation and validation, are fundamental aspects of respectful interactions. Subsequently, it creates a safe space for adolescents to develop into self-sustaining and successful grown-ups, all the while feeling supported by important adults

4.2 Key notions

For professionals working with youth the theoretical notions mentioned in the previous chapters can be internalized and expressed through pedagogical actions. For instance by

showing interest and that you care, invite youth to a dialogue about what is important to them and how they make sense of growing up, figure out with whom they affiliate and differentiate themselves – i.e. groups and social categories.

The importance of seeing the whole youth, without judgment, beyond prejudice, has become evident. Respect from adult to youth and vice versa, individual validation, and a sense of belonging to a social group or community are all very significant aspects of adolescent identity development. These aspects combine a teen's desires for both connectedness *and* autonomy at the same time.

Other key notions embedded in or originating from pedagogical viewpoints to establish supportive relationships and connect to teens' world, are: hold them accountable, enhance respectful interactions, make eye contact, acknowledge them, address them in a positive way, complement them, be consistent and reliable, build trust, facilitate a safe environment, be there for them, confront them by imposing consequences when necessary, and reward appropriate behavior.

These pedagogical aspects were obtained from reviewing the relevant literature. The next chapters center on personal experiences of practitioners regarding the central theme. The voices of the professionals are embedded in the context of the community and agency they work in.

5. Methodology

After giving a critical account on theoretical notions on identity development, both from a psychological and a sociological perspective, and demonstrating which factors are important to establish a supportive and nonthreatening relationship with youth; the subsequent chapters will supplement the theoretical with empirical inquiry. This chapter contains a description of the methodology of this study, the selection of respondents, and the decision-making process concerning the methods for collecting and analyzing data. In addition, this chapter explores and discusses the methodological quality of the investigation and assesses what has been done to establish valid, reliable, and accurate empirical data.

5.1 Qualitative Inquiry

The central questions of this study call for a theoretical inquiry as well as an empirical examination of the subject. Taking the practical nature of the research questions into account, a qualitative research method seems to be appropriate for a number of reasons. Firstly, qualitative research methods are effective in collecting theoretical information, analyzing empirical data, and exploring the interconnectedness between different sources of knowledge (Maso & Smaling, 1998: 9). Several sources of knowledge are considered in this thesis. Important notions emphasized in literature are supplemented with examples from daily practice and the experience of professionals in the field. The experience of experts should not be neglected. Because of the dual approach regarding theory and practice, the qualitative methodology appears to be specifically suitable and useful.

Secondly, – aside from describing social phenomena – qualitative inquiry is used to investigate topics concerning the way people attribute meaning and subsequently, how the assigned meanings motivate their behavior (Evers, 2007). The main focus concerns the professional establishment of supportive relationships with youth. This corresponds with the social meaning professionals ascribe to experiences, contexts, and circumstances, which is what the qualitative approach entails (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Therefore, it is an apt method of inquiry in this study.

Furthermore, the approach corresponds with research conducted at the University for Humanistic Studies, which employs the qualitative methods most frequently, and aims to ‘do justice to the concrete situations in which people give meaning to their lives and organize their interactions’ (Alma et al. 2008: 9). Qualitative inquiry typically includes ‘in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest’ (Marshall &

Rossman, 2006: 3). This is the third reason for applying this method of collecting empirical data to supplement the theoretical paradigm.

Qualitative research methods are less objective than quantitative approaches, since the investigation centers on experiences, motivations, and opinions of people. It is a pragmatic and interpretive type of research, ‘grounded in the lived experiences of people’ (Ibid: 2). This type of research is sensitive to interpretation; therefore, the importance of discussing the methodological quality is necessary. Methodological quality can be established and enhanced by explicating and justifying the validity and reliability of the methods employed. This will be elucidated in the next paragraph.

5.2 Research Design

The following paragraphs give an account of the qualitative research methods employed to collect and analyze empirical data. Furthermore, the methodological quality of this study will be explored and discussed.

Data collection

Finding practitioners as well as selecting interview questions is essential to provide empirical data to supplement the theoretical aspect of this thesis. To warrant the quality of the investigation, the data collection process needs to be documented accurately and is therefore discussed hereafter.

Sampling

The sampling method applied in this research is of a purposive nature rather than random. This purposive sample-selection is based on the research question in addition to the ‘consideration of the resources available to the researcher’ (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 45). In light of the focus question it was essential to find professionals in Los Angeles, working with disadvantaged youth on a daily basis. Thus, the professionals needed to be approached with purpose and directness.

All participants have been assured of anonymous representation in this study. Subsequently, the name of the non-profit after-school program where they work will not be disclosed in this thesis. The fictitious name employed is: Los Angeles Center for Youth (LACY). All respondents signed an informed consent⁷ prior to their participation. Informed consent intends to ensure that the participation of the respondent is entirely voluntary, non-

⁷ See appendix 3: Informed Consent

obligatory and informed. The latter means that the subject understands what the research concerns, the potential risks and benefits that accompany participation, for what purpose the data is used, and how confidentiality is guaranteed (Ibid: 85).

The respondents recruited for this study all work at the same non-profit agency LACY⁸. This makes the sample, although purposeful to the main question, limited to one agency and the community it services. Although qualitative inquiry is usually characterized by smaller samples of participants since it aims to gather in-depth information (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), the downside of a small sample should be kept in mind. Data collection from a small sample of respondents limits the ability to generalize the outcomes to a broader population (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 56). Therefore, the findings cannot be presented as general results.

Daily Practices at a Non-profit Agency

For the duration of six months I volunteered with the counseling department of LACY, two days a week on average. At the end of the day, I entered observations of daily procedures and encounters in a logbook. Personal reflections and interpretations of my experiences as a volunteer were written separately and held apart from the factual observations.

To provide a broad and extensive account of the agency, I used internal documents. These documents cannot be revealed because of the confidentiality agreement with the participants. The sole source of information from the agency and its daily practices comes from data in the logbook that I maintained throughout the research process.

Semi-Structured Interview

An in-depth interview is an excellent method to gather an individual's lived experience and perspectives (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011: 126). Depending on the central question and the corresponding research goals, the in-depth interview can vary in structure. The interview designed for this research is of a semi-structured nature.

The outline of a semi-structured interview is that of an interview guide. The investigator develops a list of questions or specific topics to be covered, but allows the interviewees some freedom to talk about their interests or what is important to them

(Ibid: 102). Some questions may not be asked or surface in the order they were planned and questions that arise during the interview because of something the respondent said can be included. Given the less controlled nature of this type of interview, information may emerge

⁸ Los Angeles Center for Youth (LACY), a full description of the agency, its vision, mission, and daily practices, can be found in chapter six.

that the researcher did not consider in advance. Nevertheless, the questions are phrased in a similar fashion across all interviews. Standardization of the vast majority of the questions improves the reliability of the generated empirical data.

The interview questions were designed to obtain general information about how the respondents establish relationships with youth and what is most important to them while connecting to the world of youth. To circumvent linguistic and cultural barriers and prevent these potential obstacles from impacting the empirical data, the interview guide included a range of questions that covered various aspects of establishing relationships with youth, the important factors, categories deduced from the literature, what they find of importance in their line of work in general, and for the community in particular.⁹

The interviews were conducted in the offices of the participants during work hours. The participants closed the door during the one-on-one interview but interruption for an emergency or urgent event was allowed. All interviews took place before the youth arrived at the site, when the staff had free time and was not occupied with work. However, conducting the interview within the work environment may have limited some staff members in distancing themselves from their immediate surroundings and preoccupations.

Throughout the interview, the information was summarized to check if the practitioner's perspectives and answers were understood correctly. All interviews were audio-recorded and summarized afterwards by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The theoretical framework provides a guideline in analyzing the data. Nevertheless, it is important to be open to new observations and knowledge that can emerge from the empirical data (Maso & Smaling, 1998: 57). This purpose is served by the combination of deductive examinations, knowledge logically derived from more general notions, and inductive analysis, knowledge drawn from empirical inquiry (Ezzy, 2002).

The process of analyzing qualitative data is an interpretive one, and includes checking interpretations with the respondents during the interview and writing memos, amongst others (Ibid: 73).

Aside from checking the answers and interpretations with the participants and writing observations and reflections in a logbook, the data was summarized and coded per interview. The methods used to organize and analyze the data of this study are *thematic analysis* and *open coding*. Coding in thematic analysis entails the identification of themes or concepts in

⁹ See appendix 4: summary of the data organized according to the questions.

the data and a systematic account of observations and recordings is given. The theory emerges through the coding process (Ibid: 86). Open coding refers to labeling categories or themes that surface from close examination of the information generated from the interviews and observations (Ibid: 88).

Methodological Quality

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the methodological quality of a study is established and enhanced by explicating and justifying the validity and reliability of the methods employed. The following section will examine and discuss the accountability of this research.

Reliability

The reliability of a study regards the objective to document the research process in order to provide tools to replicate the investigation. Although exact replication is highly unlikely, the quality of the research is increased by an accurate description of how the data and conclusions were generated. Reliability has two components: an internal and external constituent.

Internal reliability refers to ‘the extent to which assessments, judgments, ratings, and so on, internal to the research conduct, are agreed upon or replicated between researchers’ (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 271). In order to enhance the replicative character, deliberations regarding the research were entered into a logbook and decisions about the design and progress of the study were taken under supervision and approved by the professors involved. Furthermore, the interviews were audio-recorded and summarized by sequencing quotations

External reliability reflects ‘the level of replication that can be expected if similar studies are undertaken’ (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 271). Through clear documentation of research procedures an impression of the way the study was conducted improves external reliability (Maso & Smaling, 1998: 70). This chapter serves as the transparent documentation of the methodological process and the decision-making regarding the research design.

Validity

Validity is the process in which the investigator demonstrates the trustworthiness of the research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). It concerns the ‘extent to which the phenomena under study is being accurately reflected, as perceived by the study population’ (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 285). Some refer to validity as the credibility or dependability of the research. Validity also consists of an internal and external aspect.

Internal validity aims ‘to demonstrate that the inquiry was conducted in such a manner as to ensure that the subject was appropriately identified and described’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2006: 201). In other words, it involves a critical reflection on the research design and the data collection and analysis. Firstly, reporting the methodological considerations in this chapter establishes an initial validity of the study. Secondly, triangulation methods were employed. Triangulation incorporates various methods and sources to collect data, assorted theoretical notions, and multiple academic perspectives to give a comprehensive account of the study-object (Maso & Smaling, 1998: 72). Thirdly, continuous reflections throughout the research add to the validity (Ibid: 71). And finally, member validation or check was used to confirm the understanding and interpretation of the empirical data.

External validity regards the degree to which the obtained data can be applied or transferred to other members of the research population. The object of external validity is generalizations of results and conclusions, stemming from quantitative inquiry. As stated above, the qualitative approach reflects in-depth information from a small and particular sample and, therefore, cannot provide general and representative outcomes. This does not mean, however, that external validity should not be pursued.

Role of Researcher

Since qualitative research utilizes interviews as a means to obtain data, the reciprocity between the interviewee and researcher cannot be overlooked. It is essential to reflect on potential issues regarding this topic, because it impacts the results (Maso & Smaling, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

As a Caucasian, European woman finishing her Master’s degree, certain racial, cultural, and educational implications could not be overlooked. The fact that I volunteered at the after-school program and worked closely with the participants enhanced mutual understanding and made building rapport less challenging. However, reflections on the consequences of linguistic barriers and different cultural backgrounds were essential.

Transparency regarding the content and aim of the research, my role as a researcher separate from my position as a volunteer, was essential. The ‘insider status’ (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011) I developed during the months of volunteer work increased rapport and gave me an extensive account on the everyday work, the agency, and the community at large. This provided me the ability to place the data into perspective.

6. The context of South Los Angeles

The demographics of South LA will be dealt with, and the challenges youth face growing up in low-income communities. In addition, the context and daily practices of a non-profit after-school program will be highlighted.

6.1 Demographics

In a report *The State of South LA* from the UCLA¹⁰ School of Public Affairs (Ong, et.al., 2008) the conditions of this area are examined. The following concisely describes the main findings of the report:

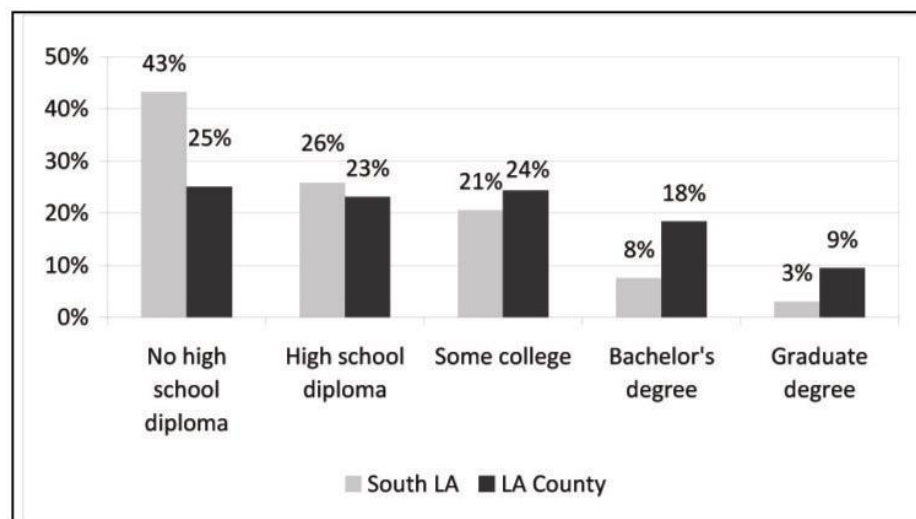
- South LA contains a higher concentration of minorities, residents below the age of eighteen, and individuals and children living below the poverty level compared to the County at large. South LA also has lower homeownership rates than LA County.
- The lower socioeconomic status of South LA residents is related, in part, to the community's economic disadvantage in the labor market. Because of low educational attainment, a large percentage of the South LA population lacks the skills necessary to acquire and hold economically rewarding employment. Many are unemployed, and a high percent of workers earn less than \$10,000 annually. Both of these outcomes are probably related to the fewer number of job opportunities within South LA.
- Property crime rates in South LA closely mirrors the County rate. However, violent crimes in South LA are twice as high. (Adapted from: Ong, et.al., 2008: 3.)

The area described as South LA consists largely of minority groups, as is typical of an inner-city neighborhood. Over the years, South LA has gone through transitions: from a dominantly White population in the early 20th century via a mostly African American community in mid-20th century to a predominantly Latino populace at the end of the century. These changes have created significant racial tensions along with increasing economic distress (Vargas, 2006; Ong, et.al., 2008; Behnken, 2011).

Percentages of the ethnic population of South LA, compared to the County at large, are: 62% Latino (47% countywide); 31 % African American (9% countywide); 3% White (29% countywide); 2% Asian/Pacific Islander (13% countywide); and 2% other (2% countywide) (Ong, et.al., 2008: 5).

¹⁰ University of California Los Angeles

The housing conditions of the majority of the South LA population are some among the worst in the County. The poverty rate in South LA is twice as high as in the County at large, therefore youth growing up in South LA are more likely to live in poverty (Ibid: 6). Studies have shown that South LA is economically disadvantaged in terms of employment. This stems from a significantly lower educational achievement than LA County (see figure 6 in Ong, et.al. 2008: 11):



Lower educational attainment results in poorer skills, and this relates to fewer employment opportunities and discrimination (Ibid: 10). In addition, job access is very low in South LA.

Furthermore, considering violent crimes and public safety, statistics show some notable differences between South LA and LA County. The following table displays public safety examined through three indicators: perception of neighborhood safety, traffic accidents and crime.

	South LA	LA County
Percent of adults (18+ year olds) who believe their neighborhood is safe	61.5	80.9
Traffic accidents per 1,000 population	14.7	12.5
Crimes per 1,000 population	19.0	17.5
Violent crimes (homicide, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) per 1,000 population	11.9	6.6
Property crimes (burglary, car theft, larceny) per 1,000 population	26.2	28.4

(Adapted from the South LA Health Equity Scorecard, 2008).¹¹

¹¹ South Los Angeles Health Equity Scorecard (2008):
<http://chcinc.org/downloads/South%20LA%20Scorecard.pdf>

Higher crime rates have a negative impact on the community with reference to stress and anxiety levels, lower housing values, weaker attachments to neighbors and the community, low business development, etc. (Ong, et.al., 2008: 24).

Overall, South LA is currently a low-income neighborhood, with a majority of Latino population, where crime numbers are above average, and youth are confronted with crime and violence on a daily basis. In addition, the number of youth growing up in poverty is high. Furthermore, education – especially higher education – is not something the teens in this neighborhood see in their future. As a critical pedagogue has argued, urban schools ‘fall short of providing critical spaces where young people of color can deconstruct racialized identities and historically oppressive relationships’ (Camangian, 2009: 2). Youth of color in urban communities are underserved and disenfranchised and therefore, in need of support and resources to help them to emerge out of poverty and other obstacles they encounter.

6.2 Growing up in a low-income community

Growing up in a low-income community can be a challenge for youth. Poverty is a known stressor for people. For adolescents the disjunction between articulated desires, future plans, and actions is a reality. They have to live with the gap between what education promises Americans and what they observe in their environments. The intersection of race, social class, and gender presents challenges to traditional models of schooling (Deutsch, 2008). For youth confronted with violence and poverty on a daily basis, it is much more difficult to imagine a sense of self that involves a high school or college degree.

According to Deutsch (2008) many adolescents recognize the awareness of other people’s perceptions of the low-income community they live in. They are conscious of the fact that they are identified by their social context. Societal labels can filter down to the levels of people’s surroundings. Deutsch states that ‘Macro level stereotypes play out in (our) local interactions and expectations, eventually infiltrating individual levels of consciousness’ (2008: 86). Teens have to decide whether or not to accept these representations of them, because these are a segment of their subconscious self-perception. Youth have to deliberately choose to resist or accommodate these representations. The decision to resist or accommodate can severely change the social context of their development (Ibid).

As discussed in chapter three, for youth growing up at the intersection of marginalization developing an ‘achieved identity’ demands enormous abilities of a teen to maneuver between social stigma’s and self-perceptions. This can cause additional stress to the already

demanding period called adolescence. Positive role models in particular have a constructive impact on marginalized youth (Deutsch, 2008).

Another factor that has a great impact on youth in low-income neighborhoods is the failing public school system. Especially in Los Angeles it is known that there are systemic problems that need to change for poor communities in order to emerge from poverty. Critical pedagogues argue that the school system in LA is devised to justify social and economic separating processes that least serves the population with greatest needs and has the lowest amount of social, political, and economic capital to meet those needs (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). According to Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, urban education should start to cultivate partnership within communities that offer youth the chance to be successful while sustaining their ‘identity as urban youth’ (Ibid: 7) in order to be effective. This is exactly the effort of the after-school program of LACY in South LA. Empowerment is a key notion in both critical pedagogy and the setting of the after-school program. As the father of critical pedagogy Paulo Freire stated in 1970: “the first step toward liberation from oppression is being able to identify and name your oppression” (Ibid: 10). Creating awareness of inequality and limited resources in low-income communities opens doors to overcome those circumstances for a person.

The context of after-school programs can serve as a space that supports positive development of adolescents in a holistic and humanistic way, providing them with a safe environment to negotiate and build their identities. Such programs offer youth possibilities and occasions to fulfill their need for individual recognition and social bonding (Deutsch, 2008). This shows the necessity for a balance between autonomy and belonging to a group (cf. Kehily, 2007; Veugelers, 2011).

6.3 Daily Practices at LACY

This paragraph will describe the agency and its mission where I conducted the empirical part of this study and an account of a regular day at the center and specific information about the counseling department and their approach will be presented. Examples that illustrate the daily reality of youth at the center, and originate from my experience as a volunteer, are presented in textboxes throughout this section.

The Agency

The non-profit after-school program called Los Angeles Center for Youth (LACY) was

My first day at LACY I looked after a small group of kids doing some fun and educational assignments. One girl was rushing to finish her drawing at the end of the class. I told her she could take it home. 'We don't have coloring pencils at home' was her reply. She confronted me with the hard reality of living in poverty and I realized I had to adjust my frame of reference.

founded after the Los Angeles riots in 1992. The idea behind the establishment was to provide youth in South LA with a safe place, a safe haven, where they could come after school, do their homework, be with friends and people who care about them. Initially the center was created for youth affected by gangs in their impoverished community, but it developed into an agency where youth

aged eight to twenty are offered various programs such as: tutoring, dance, music, fitness, a computer lab, a separate teen program with college preparations, a kitchen that provides a healthy meal every day, and a Counseling Department. The agency has about three hundred members, with an average attendance of one hundred youth a day; 82% of the members is Latino, the other 18 % African American.

The mission of LACY is to empower underserved youth to take ownership of the quality and direction of their lives in a safe environment. The safe environment is established through security at the entrance and members are not allowed to leave the premises until someone comes to pick them up – with the exception of the teens, who are allowed to come and go more freely. Until the age of fourteen, the members are required to come in five days a week. If kids skip on a regular basis without good reason, i.e. health or family issue, their membership is revoked and given to a waitlisted kid. The teens have to come in three days a week to maintain their membership at LACY.

Another important characteristic is that LACY encourages youth to 'pay it forward'. This concept entails a philosophy of giving back to others what a person has received in the past. At LACY they give out bracelets with the text 'Pay it Forward' printed on them and stimulate youth to support others through volunteer work, helping at fundraisers or other events, etc. By applying this concept LACY wants to inspire youth to make a difference in society and give back to the community. This demonstrates the center's orientation towards the community it serves.

The agency consists of an average of forty staff members across a variety of departments. Besides the fulltime staff, LACY has an external Board of Directors and Leadership Council who review the decision-making process and plan the direction of the agency. The Executive Director works closely with the Director of Programs and Director of Counseling Services who, in turn, both have staff members under their supervision. The Director of Programs is

responsible for the budget and content of the different departments, which are lead by department coordinators. The departments are, in no particular order: Educational Services, Music – lessons as well as a recording studio, Art, Dance, Fitness, Nutrition, Digital media – including a computer lab, photography and film lab, and finally, the teen program. Some departments have multiple staff members; others consist of one or two. Apart from the fulltime staff, every department works with interns and/or volunteers to assist the staff. Many interns are preparing to become either a teacher or social worker. Volunteers are usually doing hours for school or community service.

The agency is a non-profit organization, funded through donation, grants, and some government funds. Throughout the year, fundraisers are crucial for the agency to keep running and providing resources for the community. They have an annual Gala, a celebrity bowling and poker event, and a luncheon for donors.

LACY aims to bring the outside world to its members, teach them what else exists, what lies beyond the neighborhood and city they grow up in, and demonstrate the possibilities and opportunities they can have. A goal is to broaden the horizon of South LA youth through teaching them, for example, not just about the sports they know from home, but also with sports from all over the world. Or, for instance, let youth become acquainted with different dance styles, food across cultures, and musical styles they might never learn about otherwise. The youth at LACY lack opportunities and resources to visit or travel places, therefore, staff organizes field trips per department that are specifically interesting to them.

The program specifically developed for teens (age fourteen to twenty) has the objective to support and encourage teenagers through high school and moving them on to college. It aims for adolescents to become successful and healthy adults. The program provides tutoring services, SAT (Scholastic Achievement Test) preparations, guidance counseling, college tours, and college scholarships. Additionally, the LACY teen program offers internships for its teenagers at the agency; they present job opportunities and encourage adolescents to find work, the program provides a mentor trajectory for the teens, but also educates and stimulates teen as mentors and role models for the younger members. For instance, in the past couple of months a teen leadership council was created with the objective to instill culture amongst all members and peer-to-peer modeling and mentoring from teens to kids. This encourages an agency culture and code of conduct instigated by youth, as well as teen

A teen came into an office I was working in and told a staff member and me that he had been locked in his house the previous day due to a shooting in the area. Someone had shot another person and was hiding in one of his neighbors' houses. The police had blocked the whole street. What struck me about his story was that he talked about this incident as if it was a most common event. These violent crimes are a part of his reality, of his daily life.

leadership skills and responsibilities. Consequently, the teens will feel noticed and taken seriously. It stimulates their development into responsible adults and instills the message to ‘pay it forward’ and give back to others what they have received at the center.

Besides these services, the teen program also engages the adolescents in group-discussion about interesting topics, movies, music, etc., they organize workshops on sexual education., all staff members talk to the teens, stay alert for any signs that might indicate problems – either at school or at home – and make an effort to ask how a teen is doing, what is going on in his or her life. The staff members engage themselves to get to know the teens in the program, to make sure they support and service them in any way possible, without forgetting to empower the youth, continuously encourage them to take ownership of their own lives, and keep holding them accountable.

Girl Power is a program specifically designed for girls aged thirteen or fourteen and up, to acquire self-esteem. The goal is to empower these young ladies, to help them develop their own voice. At the end they are presented at a luncheon for donors and asked to speak up and tell the audience what Girl Power has given them. For this event, and also the high school prom, LACY arranges the Cinderella and Prince Charming Project. Two whole days the center is transformed into a boutique for teenagers to pick out a prom dress or suit. Especially for the girls this is a big event. They can attend workshops on make-up, hairstyling, and empowerment.

Empowering youth requires equipping them with tools to construct their own narratives within the community in order to resist negative, dominant, cultural narratives (Deutsch, 2008). A place centered on youth and facilitating a space where they can create their boundaries of themselves and others is very important for adolescents. According to Deutsch this is especially relevant for teenagers who are confined by negatively labeled meanings of social categories in society (2008: 194). Those adolescents benefit from further support and resources essential to take control of their own lives and develop achievable goals. A program like LACY also facilitates the experience of a sense of belonging that is much needed for youth – and human beings in general for that matter (Kehily, 2007). To quote the work of Deutsch once more:

‘... youth need spaces in which they can safely and constructively confront and engage with cultural discourses of race and class in the process of forming their own shared and individual identities’ (2008: 106).

The fact that LACY provides scholarships for qualified students tends to make college more accessible. This corresponds with important goals instigated by critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). According to this movement, the only way that youth can become informed and empowered participants of greater social collectives is if they are self-actualized and start to accept and love themselves. These transformations can occur simultaneously, but it is unthinkable to deal with one without dealing with the other (Ibid: 190).

A Day at LACY...

For most of the staff members their workday begins around ten in the morning with meetings and administrative tasks.

Everyone prepares for the moment the members come in. Since the youth attend various elementary, middle, and high schools in the neighborhood, the exact time they arrive is unpredictable. Usually the elementary and middle school youth start coming in around two in the afternoon. There are several LACY busses that pick the kids up from school. Only the high school kids are allowed to walk by themselves.

Once the members start coming in, they begin with their homework. Several tutors in addition to the staff are available to assist them. If they do not have any homework, the Educational Services staff will provide them with assignments. Rules and guidelines within the agency at all times, include: treat each other with respect; absolutely no bullying and cussing; tidy up after yourself; treat others like you want to be treated; make everybody feel welcome and at home, etc.

At four thirty, the kitchen provides all the kids with a healthy meal. For a lot of the members this is the only healthy meal they eat that day. Unfortunately, this also means that many of them do not like it, since they are used to candy, cookies, and chips. All staff members encourage the kids to eat healthy and sweets or treats are not allowed inside the center. Healthy snacks are occasionally provided by kitchen or counseling staff to kids they know are having next to nothing to eat at home.

After the meal, the kids have time to play outside until five thirty, after which their classes start. On the odd chance that it rains, the kids play board games in the family room instead of playing or exercising outside.

Everyone has two classes of an hour each day. It depends on what classes the kids were signed up for by the parents or caretakers, or the interests the kids have expressed themselves. All kids have at least one hour at the educational services department where additional

education is provided. The other classes are music, dance, art, fitness, digital media, or cooking. The teen program operates on a separate schedule.

At six thirty parents, caretakers, or family members wait outside the gate for the members to take them home.

The Counseling Department

The Counseling Department distinguishes LACY from other after-school programs in LA. This department offers culturally competent, confidential, and inclusive therapy and human services to all members of the agency, their families, and the community at large. One of the key objectives is to de-mystify counseling for the families in the community. The aim is for youth to be empowered, become socially successful, and equipped with skills to be emotionally prepared to reach full potential in life. The counseling staff uses various humanistic modalities to enable clients to be active participants in solving their own problems and acquiring the tangible skills to become socially successful and academically persistent. The objective of the counseling department is to empower youth, their families, and community members to make a difference in their own lives, one family at a time.

A staff member brought a girl to the counseling department because she had written a letter to a friend about how ugly she is. Kids at her school had told her that she was ugly and she believed them. The way LACY instills self-worth and encourages empowerment is positive appraisal. A counselor took the girl to a mirror and started to tell her what is beautiful about her. Then, she asked the girl what she thinks is beautiful.

The humanistic and holistic perspective on counseling and the approach towards members, parents, and the community that follows from this perspective, entails a non-diagnostic endeavor. The counselors are trained to view the youth as a whole and take the system and social context into consideration when deciding how to approach the situation. The counselors use the methods incorporating the family systems theory of psychiatrist Murray Bowen. This is a theory of human behavior that interprets the family as an emotional entity and uses the systems approach to describe the complex interactions within the entity. It is the nature of a family that its members are intensely connected emotionally. The family system model is based on the principle that family members profoundly affect each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions. As stated before, it is included in this view that people seek each other's attention, approval, and support and respond to each other's needs, expectations, and distress.

When a teen or kid is acting out or behaving inappropriately, the counselors at LACY see this as potential signals of something amiss in the situation at home or school. They explore what is going on in the youth's environment by asking questions and observing the behavior.

The counselors are concerned with behavioral interventions and checking how youth who have caught the attention during programs are doing, for the majority of their time. The interventions follow the triangle method: What happened? What did you do wrong? What can you do different next time?

Once a week, staff members from each department meet for Case Conference. This is when individual kids that have been behaving out of character are listed. The Counseling Department has their meeting directly after this meeting to discuss further actions. Other youth that have raised concern on a confidential level are reviewed as well, just as the progress of individual trajectories per counselor. The Counseling Department meets with the Teen program staff once a week to compare notes and evaluate the improvement of certain teenagers.

Individual sessions with youth are either requested by parents, caretakers, external social workers, school counselors, or mandated by the court. The parents or caretakers have to sign a consent form for counseling, in case staff reports a member through Case Conference, or if it concerns sensitive and confidential information by talking to a counselor directly. If the latter takes place, the counselors will call the parents in for further information. After assessing the situation, counseling can follow with the parents consent.

Sometimes it is as simple as giving youth one-on-one attention since they usually do not receive that at home. The counselors complement the kids on what they are wearing, the female counselors call the members ‘sweety, love, mi amor’ and ask many questions to get to know the youth and to pin point how they are doing.

Other tasks of the Counseling Department at LACY are: preparing and giving out food and clothing donations to pre-assigned families who are having severe financial troubles. The department organizes an annual Parent Advisory meeting; and is responsible for staff development training on mandated reporting and behavioral intervention training. Mandated reporting refers to the legal obligation to report any signals of neglect or abuse to the Department of Child and Family Services. During the six months I spent there, there were at least five reports filed on the days I was present.

A boy came into the counseling department crying because other kids did not allow him to play with their team. The reason was the color of his skin. The counselor was very empathic and told him that if somebody does not let you in because of your skin color, such an act is awful and horrible. She asked the boy, who made the racist remark how he thinks it would feel like if he were not allowed to participate because of his skin color. “Sad and painful” he replied. He apologized at the counselor’s request. To finish this incident and resolve the situation completely, the counselor explained to both boys that nobody chooses the way they are born, what skin color they have. ‘It is not okay to be racist about that. No one can help it.’ The boy who had made the remark started to cry as well. The counselor comforted him by saying ‘It’s okay, you did well, and you apologized.’

7. Voices from the Practice

This chapter gives an account of the data collected from the structured interviews. It reports the voices from the people who participated in this study. The structured interview questions were focused on their experience and expertise working with youth.

7.1 Respondents

The participants in this study all work at the non-profit agency LACY described in chapter 5. In total, eight people were interviewed; i.e. the whole counseling department and the fulltime staff working with the teenagers. Although the counseling department and the teen program operate separately, the staff members work closely together.

Four of the respondents are female and four male. Five are within the age range of 25-30, two age 31-40, and one in the age range of 41-50. Their ethnicities are African American (three); Latino (three); Asian (one); and Caucasian (one).

The positions they fill within the agency are the Director of Counseling Services (one), Counselors (two), Case Managers (two), Youth Service Manager (one), a Marriage and Family Therapy intern (one), and a Forensic Psychology intern (one). Six completed a Masters' degree and six are currently attend universities, and are enrolled in Masters' or PhD programs.

Motivation

Most of the respondents (six of eight) express that their motivation for going into this line of work had to do with similar experiences and backgrounds as the youth they work with. Three respondents clearly mention that knowing the obstacles and challenges these kids face and having been fortunate enough to have had someone in their environment to support them while growing up, made them want to give such support back to teens and kids, offering them a network of support. Respondent 1 (R1) states her passion lies in "helping kids through the lens of education, and give [them] strength to overcome obstacles and live an independent and self-sustaining life," because looking back on her past she realized that education was the key to her success and was crucial for making the changes within herself and her situation.

The idea to give back and support teens in circumstances they have no control over (for example: you are born into your family and cannot choose them), and try to give adolescents the strength to overcome obstacles and still live an independent self-sustaining life is something that has motivated some of the participants. R2 says kids from low-income

communities especially need support because they have limited opportunities and resources, “they need people that actually care about them.”

For other respondents, their motivation came from observing and experiencing inequity in the social justice arena. For example, R4 believes that “counseling could be a powerful tool for social justice and helping people to manage their own lives.” Another respondent mentioned it has to do with an idealistic notion: “I believe every child should have the same opportunities. So I want to instill hope and be there for them, regardless of parental support. Offer them something constant. Tell them they have options. It should be their choice and it should be the same choice that everybody else has” (R8).

7.2 Meeting them where they’re at

This section highlights what the respondents have singled out as important regarding the establishment of a relationship with youth.¹² The topics are discussed in the order of factors that were mentioned by most of the participants to what was only articulated by a few and according to the interview questions. These topics overlap and intersect quite a bit.

The answers will be narrated and linked to the theoretical framework of this study.

Empowerment

One factor all eight of the respondents mentioned is the importance of empowering youth. This is a goal they all explicitly enunciated. It is essential to “strengthen their own sense of self-advocacy and independence” says R1, so teens can develop their voice and make a statement in this world. In addition, it is important to instill that they have control over their life, things do not ‘just happen;’ it is about encouraging self-advocacy and not making any excuses.

Another respondent emphasizes empowerment through explaining the importance of encouraging youth to use their voice and making sure that when they speak up, it matters. Often adults “minimize what kids say and don’t really listen” R5 says, “It does take time but the lack of attention to kids makes them feel that they have no voice.”

Someone else states empowering youth as: “Equipping them with the skills, self-esteem, and capacity to be able to lift them up out of poverty; so to change their lives and the ones around them” (R6). The main thing is helping youth to “do their best and reach their potential, or as close to that potential as possible” (R2).

¹² Appendix 4 offers a summary of the results per question.

Particularly for teenagers it is important that they feel empowered and are shown to have options, encouraging them to think ahead, broaden their horizon. Most of these teens do not know they have opportunities:

“Help the kids understand the perspective of what their landscape is, most of the time we don’t know what our options are. It’s what I’m telling the kids all the time: we have to strive for more, set higher goals. There’s so much more we can get out of life than that. The obstacles are there, but just knowing what the obstacles are and how to overcome them – these can be simple things like learning how to apply for a job, social skills, what it means to go to college and if you want to go to college what do you have to do to get there. Making things go from pile-high dreams to actual goals” (R3).

Many of the theoretical perspectives correspond to this notion and realization of empowerment. As Baumeister (1991) explicated, merely understanding a situation can give a sense of control and that contributes to feeling empowered as is making youth aware of their possibilities and talents (cf. Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Also the importance of forming supportive relationships – albeit with professionals (cf. De Olivares, 2004; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Deutsch, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Camangian, 2010), peers (cf. Sullivan, 1953; Selman, 1980), or family members (cf. Villaruel et. al., 2009). Finally, the significance of facilitating a safe space, or moratorium, for youth to shape their sense of self and possibly attain an achieved identity matches some of the literature (cf. Erikson, 1950; 1968; Marcia, 1980; De Olivares, 2004; Deutsch, 2008).

Listen actively

When people work with children and adolescents, it is imperative that they listen to youth. Listen actively and really hear what they have to say is stressed by the majority of participants. A notable comment of one respondent was that when you ask a teen how he or she is doing, you have to be ready to listen because nine times out of ten they have something to say.

A parallel between the answers from the counseling and teen program staff at LACY and what De Olivares (2004) underscored about care and timing is noticeable (see chapter four). The affirmation that youth have something to say enhances empowerment by encouraging them to express themselves and to find their own voice.

Equality and respect

All the respondents state that it is key to treat youth as equals, as persons, and give them the respect they deserve. R2 explains: “If you try to talk down to them [teens] that’s not going to work. They deserve to be treated equally and with respect. We’re always telling the kids about respecting others and we need to respect them as well.” Approaching youth as an authoritative figure does not provide a setting to establish a relationship of trust and mutual respect (cf. Selman, 1980; Herman, 1997; De Olivares, 2004; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Deutsch, 2008). “I trust that they are respect worthy and they’re my equal so I don’t use any affectation or hierarchal alignment” says R4. An accepting, nonjudgmental, and open-minded attitude is closely related to this and clearly underlined by six of the participants.

Being there

It is fundamental to be there for youth, to be present, and make them feel seen. Six of the respondents explicitly emphasize this. It has to do with an attempt to give youth what they need and might not get from other places. All young people want to feel seen, heard, and taken seriously. This can be accomplished by meeting them where they are developmentally and emotionally, via relating to what the child or adolescent is experiencing, what he or she is going through. Position yourself as a fellow journeyer in youth’s imagination or world, in the words of R4. Meet them where they are, connect to their lived experience (cf. De Olivares, 2004) is stressed by seven respondents. R3 says that “more than anything it’s about sharing a bit about yourself and also listening to them, figuring them out, just being there for them. Constantly being there.”

Patience

Patience is a prerequisite, according to the staff of LACY. One has to make time for youth and have patience to build a relationship. Connecting to them takes time and maintenance, especially with teenagers. Five respondents express that the ‘little kids’ (age 8-12) are easy to connect with because “they want to be friends with everybody” (R2). Kids from this age group are usually straightforward and honest. And if something is going on they want to talk about it.

According to one participant it is like taking care of a plant: “relationships are living growing things and like a plant it takes a while to grow and it’s easy to damage it. One day a little bit too much sunlight and you can destroy a plant in a split second. So you have to maintain and groom” and this takes time, patience, and maintenance. You have to get to

know the youth you are talking to, figure out where you connect. Through connection a mutual understanding could potentially emerge (cf. Selman, 1980).

It is striking that only De Olivares mentions patience as a major factor in working with youth, while staff at LACY all articulate this as a necessary attribute.

Where you're coming from

All children and teenagers especially, need to know where you – as a professional – are coming from. This could refer to showing who you are as a person, what drives you, the values you uphold, what you expect from the teens, etc. Informing them about what you do is one of many possibilities in providing clarity on this subject: “I think it’s important for them [teens] to understand the role I have so I try to give them a heads up on what I do and why I’m here... and then move from that” (R7).

Other ways to be clear about where you are coming from is disclosure and it can be established through authenticity, honesty, and genuine care for youth (cf. De Olivares, 2004; Deutsch, 2008). All of the participants agree that youth can feel if you do not genuinely care for them, when you are not honest. Some explicitly say one has to love youth to work with them, have a drive or passion to get to know them, and be there for them.

Informing adolescents, being clear about expectations offers a safe, secure and trusting environment (Herman, 1997; De Olivares, 2004; Deutsch, 2008).

Positive reinforcement and appraisal

One of the participants explains the importance of positive remarks and praise since many interactions between youth and adults occur when youth have done something inappropriate or wrong, not when they have done something good or note-worthy. This makes it all the more substantial to praise them, compliment, reaffirm them, instill confidence and self-esteem, and always end on a positive note; important factors to build a long-term relationship with youth. Five other respondents also confirm these factors as fundamental. The factors correspond mainly to what De Olivares (2004) wrote about complimenting youth and not just confronting them when they have behaved inappropriately. Otherwise, this would not work in favor of realizing the goal to empower youth, to encourage them to become autonomous and responsible adults. Help, encourage, and support youth so they can see and reach their potential; develop possibilities (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

The respondents’ link positive reinforcement and appraisal to showing youth that they have faith in them, i.e. believe they can do even better. Some stress it is critical to hold them

to standards – high standards – to demonstrate the fact that they can achieve more than they think. This is especially true for teenagers.

About approaching teens, R6 says the following: “Positivity, empathy, without being condescending, and always holding in mind that a lot of these kids have had really tough starts in life, so that needs to be taken very strongly into consideration too, also with [your] mind on the future, how can I help this kid to be the best that they can be and equip them for the world.”

Trust

All respondents mention the importance of building trust as a crucial factor in establishing a relationship with youth. Trust can be developed through consistency, follow-through, acceptance, and stability (cf. De Olivares, 2004; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Deutsch, 2008). “It’s kind of an art form, not a science,” says R3. For R6 it has to do with treating youth (and especially teens) as equals: “So not creating power differentials like a teacher and a pupil... I attempt to make it more of an equal relationship, because I think that that helps foster trust.”

Subsequently, it is important to have faith in youth that they can make good choices and do the best they can with support. Express your faith in them and, in addition, be convinced of it. See and articulate teens’ positive skills and talents, challenge and encourage them to reach higher goals (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; De Olivares, 2004). This topic is closely linked to the ones previous displayed.

Youth sense if a person is genuine someone; the way someone looks at him or her; and are sensitive to that. It often comes across in your manner according to R6. Consistency plays a part too: “don’t make promises you can’t keep because kids will remember you for that. Not judging them is important too. Be patient, hear them out, and be there for them. We become role models for the kids and model values” (R5) (cf. Marcia, 1980; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Deutsch).

Being open and sharing a little about yourself in order to let youth know where you are coming from, also increases a trusting relationship. As everything is interlinked, trust can be designated as closely related to authenticity and keeping promises. In the end it is a relationship and authenticity is crucial. As R4 articulates it: “I just try to have an honest relationship with them.” Humor, fun, and building a friendship are emphasized as well (R1, R2, R4). Somebody who has the capacity to be lighthearted and fun is ideal according to R6. Interestingly, humor, fun, and lighthearted contact are not found in the reviewed literature.

A comfortable and safe environment

Working with youth requires a warm, welcoming, inviting, and open environment to make them feel comfortable and safe. When you are approachable, smile at kids, say ‘hi’ and ask how they are doing, they will feel seen and it invites them to start a conversation with you (cf. De Olivares, 2004). R7 describes his starting point when connecting to teenagers: “The first thing I do is I try to be as welcoming as possible; I try to come in with a smile and a warm attitude towards that person. I try to be as nonjudgmental as I can. Whenever I meet someone or am introduced to someone I try to focus on them, definitely eye contact is very important to me, and I try to see their responses to my initial introduction.”

It is important to the respondents that youth experience LACY as a safe-haven and a place where they can talk to someone without being judged or without have to worry about how people perceive them when they did or experienced something. A safe-haven or safe space is profoundly important for youth to engage in the process of negotiating and shaping an identity (cf. Erikson, 1950; Marcia, 1980; Gilligan, 1993; De Olivares, 2004; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Deutsch, 2008).

It is relational, across any culture it is just that: “When people feel safe in relationships, that’s when you can help them” (R4).

Boundaries and holding youth accountable

Encouraging and empowering youth, being there and actively listen to them, treating them with respect, make positive remarks, and build trust, has to be accompanied by setting boundaries and holding youth accountable for their decisions and behavior: “When a child is getting into trouble you sometimes have to be firm with them and explain things to them” (R2).

In their description of the ideal person working with youth, the interviewees emphasize the importance of teaching youth to take responsibility for their actions. It is a fine line between holding youth accountable and punishing them. According to R1 it is important not to punish them. For instance, the counselors use a model of behavioral interventions in which the youth describe what happened, what the effects of the behavior were, and how they can deal with that particular situation differently.

It is of great importance to not raise your voice at youth or confront them while others are present. This would shame them. An ideal person working with youth is somebody who is kind and empathic yet has the ability to be firm and keep boundaries (R6). Someone who knows how to tell teens ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ and ‘wait,’ since most people say one of these three

things all the time and do not use different responses when appropriate (R3). It is important to contain a youth; containment, or 'holding a child' (R6), fosters a safe environment for them to express themselves and explore who they want to be. This is incredibly valuable to a teen's identity development (cf. Erikson, 1950; Marcia, 1980; Gilligan, 1993; De Olivares, 2004; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006; Deutsch, 2008).

Attuning to age

First of all, the respondents emphasize that although there might be a slight difference in their approach, the fundamentals are the same in connecting to youth of all ages. Second, some stress the fact that age is not the main factor but the developmental stage. As R6 says: "Kids develop at different rates and especially ... trauma or certain kind of parenting can lead to a delay in development. So sometimes you might have a 16 year old coming in, acting at the level of an 8 year old behaviorally and emotionally or even younger." Other participants recount similar examples. Nakkula & Toshalis (2006) keep underscoring to view youth, encounters, and factors developmentally, instead of for example age categories.

Those comments aside, there are some general remarks of the respondents that are noteworthy. As conveyed before, children aged 8-10 are fairly easy to connect to and to establish a relationship with according to the respondents from LACY. Although these kids might require your full attention, it is not so difficult to pinpoint their needs and develop a relationship so they open up, and talk about what is bothering them.

Complexity starts to enter into their personalities around age 12. It is slightly more complicated to locate their needs and identify where they are developmentally. They are in the process of figuring out how to be. According to R4 it is different with the 14+ year olds: "even when their identities are always shifting and changing, at least you can identify it for the day, like 'today I am the rebel, tomorrow I'm the artist' They may be shifting, but for me it's a little easier to pinpoint where they are in the trajectory."

R3 explains he encourages the 14 to 16 year olds to: "believe that they have power agency in their life, and the older folks [aged 16-19] I have to encourage to grab on to the agencies they've already accepted and use it towards their goals 'you know what you can do and what you want to do' and really map that out. Basically telling the older ones to do what they want and the younger ones that they can do stuff."

Gender

Aside from the fact that there are some gender stereotypes to take into consideration, such as girls are more verbal and capable of talking about their feelings etc., it is interesting to note

that the (male) respondents working with teens are more verbal about the differences. The differences according to two female respondents have more to do with the topics that one discusses with youth than their approach or way of connecting to them. It seems to have more to do with how the kids interact with them. Another female respondent explains that culture can have a major impact on how youth interact with her. Especially when they are brought up within a culture where the male is the ‘head of the family.’ Boys can interact very differently (and sometimes less respectful) with woman staff members.

Another notable fact is that the male respondents were more cautious on the gender-subject. One respondent explains: “I’m really careful in dealing with gender differences. And also as far as liability stuff, I want to make sure that I am not in any kind of trouble. With girls I try to be much more guarded with what I say and how I say it” (R7). Someone else says that he does not mind to discuss any topic, but it is up to the youth (female) to decide what they feel comfortable talking to a male staff member about; “most of the time it’s the boys that come in with questions and needs about things that I cannot discuss with the girls that’s why we have female staff in counseling or teen program” (R2).

Some of the participants clearly link gender to culture (R3, R7, R8).

Culture

All of the respondents agree that when it comes to culture – but also ethnicity, gender nationality, etc. – there are aspects you need to be aware of. It is important that one understands the background and dynamics of the family a youth comes from, five out of eight practitioners state. They explain you have to be mindful of this factor, but not to treat youth different because of it.

Some LACY staff believes that certain signs are related to culture. In some cultures it is considered disrespectful to look adults in the eye, in other cultures eye contact is a sign of respect. For instance, Latino kids show respect with their heads down or when they are facing consequences they put their head down, as a sign of ‘OK, I messed up,’ R7 explains. For an African American kid it is different, he says, “they respond with their head up and they listen to you with their head up and that’s their sign – to me – of showing respect.” This corresponds to the values of respect and obedience within the Latino culture (cf. Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999; Villarrual et.al, 2009) and the Cool Pose of especially African American males (Major & Billson, 1992).

On the same topic R5 elucidates that one has to be as open-minded as possible and take the whole youth into account: where they come from and what the cultural expectations and

norms are; in some cultures it is considered a taboo to talk about what is going on in your personal life.

The majority of the respondents voice that in dealing with the parents, cultural sensitivity and cultural competency is particularly necessary. With youth, popular culture seems to be more of an influence according to one respondent.

“I think that the youth culture is a thing onto itself that’s driven by popular culture in such a dynamic way with the Internet and TV. So all of these kids share a commonality ... But the kids are pretty much all on one accord. They listen to the same music, they watch the same shows, talk the same way, eat the same things; regardless (...) I just accept that as the power of popular culture. And I attune to that, I let them teach me and there are times I use it as a metaphor. I use basketball to talk to the boys or baseball; whatever their world is inhabited with I try to make use of it” (R4).

Some respondents see a different cultural background than Latino beneficial in the sense that they can ask questions about their culture, values and customs, language, etc. They can even show the youth they really care by trying to speak Spanish with them (R1, R3, R6). In contrast, it can be a plus to be able to talk to members, and their families, in their native language (R5).

On a critical note, one of the respondents remarks that having a similar cultural background ‘helps and hurts’ at the same time. For instance, he represents African American male identity to the Black teenage males. He embodies a Black male authority and that might be unpleasant for youth, because “they might have a bad relationship with Black male authority, an uncle or father or grandfather or whoever. So all of a sudden I have to box out of it and redefine what it means to be a positive Black male in someone’s life” (R3). Then again, he explains that for long-term relationships this can actually be a very positive influence – once the African American male identity has been redefined.

‘Meet them where they’re at’

The following appears to be more applicable to teenagers (ages 14 and up). The respondents who work mainly with adolescents focus more on future goals and prospects, as opposed to a more generally approach with the younger kids on how they feel or how they can deal with their emotions. This does not mean that coping with emotions and interventions on the level of feelings is avoided in discussions with teenagers. The answers voiced about teens center more on options they have, educational opportunities, skill development, and other things that help prepare them for autonomous lives as adults. As one of the teen program staff says:

“These kids don’t see the future, they don’t think past the next day – if that far. They don’t do any kind of goal setting; they don’t foresee themselves in the future being successful (...) for the majority of our teens they don’t know what’s going to happen to them tomorrow and they don’t think about it” (R1).

The remarks on specifically working with adolescents deal with encouraging them to broaden their horizons, set higher goals, and empowering them to develop their voice and speak up; because most of the time “you can see things in people that they can’t see in themselves” (R3). It is important to challenge teens and not avoid the difficult topics or questions (R7) and help them to reach their potential and to see possibilities. Encourage them to take on challenge in order to experience the satisfactions of mastering or completing it.

Hold them to higher expectations than they would themselves; encourage autonomy, social interactions, self-advocacy; and empower them to take ownership over the direction and goals in their lives. Let them know each kid is deserving of love, care, and validation.

The practitioners have illustrated the importance of an integrated method, i.e. a method in which the individual as well as the socio-cultural perspective is considered. The statement ‘seeing the whole youth’ implies taking personality, drives, behavior and the context, culture, family situation, educational and social skills into account.

8. Conclusion: Challenging Youth

The central questions of this research will be posed again and answered. A view on ethical or life counseling will be expressed as well. Subsequently, this study will be reviewed critically and recommendations for further research will be provided.

8.1 Establishing supportive relationships

The central focus of this thesis folds into two questions:

1. *Which factors are important to establish a supportive relationship with youth?*
2. *How do professionals connect to the lived experience and world of disadvantaged youths living in Los Angeles, in order to reach, help, and support them?*

The first question mainly refers to the reviewed literature; the second mostly concerns the interviews. The factors that appear to be essential to establish a supportive relationship with youth are depicted hereafter in no particular order. As a professional it is crucial to show teens that you care and are genuinely interested in them as a person. Incorporate their character, drives, behaviors, interests, beliefs, as well as their social and cultural contexts. Discover what keeps teenagers going and whom they affiliate and differentiate themselves with.

The pedagogical aspects of professional conduct that are frequently emphasized across the literature, include treating a youth with respect and encourage respectful interactions, hold teens accountable for their behavior, make eye contact and acknowledge them, address youth in a positive manner, complement them, be consistent and reliable, build trust and facilitate a safe environment, be there for them, listen, confront them by imposing consequences when necessary, and reward appropriate behavior. The importance of seeing the whole youth, without judgment, beyond prejudice, has become evident.

These pedagogical factors are also underscored in the empirical data. Patience is one of the aspects all practitioners mentioned that was not stressed clearly in the reviewed literature. Another topic a respondent emphasized regarding a welcoming and warm environment centers specifically on the office or actual surroundings. This supplements the importance of providing a safe environment, which refers to a figurative as well as literal safe space. The use of positive reinforcement and appraisal in addressing teens is accentuated even more by the practitioners than the theoretical studies suggested. The professionals stress the importance of pinpointing where youth are developmentally. Theory and practice both show

that professionals have to connect to adolescents' lived experiences, i.e. meet them where they're at.

Underlying goals of establishing a relationship with youth according to the practitioners are: support youth, empower them, and equip them with the necessary skills to evolve into self-sufficient adults, who take ownership of the direction of their own life. Make them aware of the options they have, the possibilities, and challenge them to reach their potential.

The practitioners who participated in this study demonstrated in a clear-cut way how important it is to take all factors into consideration: from individual psychological aspects about a youth's character, behavior, drives, etc. to the situational or contextual influences on various levels. Race, ethnicity, culture, gender, social class, the family and home situation, need to be taken into account as well. All factors and fields of tensions are significant and have an impact on a person's life.

In addition, the methods and techniques to ascertain a relationship with youth center mainly on situational and relational aspects. For instance, developing safe and trusting relationships is crucial for further supportive interactions. Methods and techniques focus more on prerequisites for creating a welcoming and secure environment than immediate in-depth conversations about the teen and his or her future. Showing you care and are willing to listen, aids in establishing such relationships. It is important to keep in mind that fostering this kind of understanding and connection takes time and patience.

LACY provides the community and its constituents with resources they would otherwise not have access to. The work they do is invaluable to the members and their families. The fact that LACY commits to methods for broadening the horizon of youth in a low-income community and challenges them to think in terms of possibilities is significant. The goal to empower youth and inspire teens to give back to the community is a fundamental asset. The staff instigates an environment in which youth can learn and discover the values they uphold and want to strive for. LACY facilitates a necessary safe space for youth. They also aim to demystify counseling within the community, which encourages the population to ask for help when needed and allows them access to such resources.

There is not much statistical information about the effectiveness of the approach and methods of LACY. Gathering such information is a current priority to acquire so they can demonstrate the affect the program has on the members and to ascertain new funds.

However, it is important to keep in mind to not only serve the community without encouraging the members and community to give back or 'pay it forward' – either to the population in general or the agency. People need to realize they cannot presume to have

access to resources. They have to take responsibility. Furthermore, education is essential since the public school system has great difficulties in realizing their goals, particularly in Los Angeles; an organization as LACY can fill this gap and should focus even more on the objective to take responsibility and give back to others. In addition, the Counseling Department could provide the members more with group discussions and sessions in order to reach and support more youth and instigate a more unified culture within the center. The staff is currently working hard to establish the latter by instigating a teen leadership council to carry out the LACY message and expectations. This is a noteworthy development and challenges adolescents even more.

What can be taken home from this experience and the expertise present at LACY, from the perspective of a professional humanistic life counselor? The results illustrated that counseling – or working with youth in general – occurs on a more fundamental level than the theoretical framework suggests. Theoretical perspectives and frameworks based on academic knowledge and studies are important to differentiate, ascribe meaning, and to signify social contexts and individual challenges. However, the obstacles and challenges youth encounter in real life appear to demand basic skills to endure everyday life. This disputes what theories seem to imply. Particularly youth growing up in a low-income urban community are less concerned with finding meaning and more occupied with surviving. In situations like those of the youth described in this study, the establishment of a healthy and supportive relationship with a staff member and/or peer is already a major accomplishment.

8.2 Life Counseling

The aforementioned results and critical notes on establishing supportive relationships with underserved youth form the foundation for my view on the profession of humanistic life counseling.

Existential themes, basic needs for meaning, social justice, equality, etc. are still extremely significant. However, they play at a different level, usually in the background, for marginalized youth. These teens are dealing with questions about how to survive as well as the meaning of it, although they do not express themselves in these terms. That is another critical note I want to emphasize. At the University for Humanistic Studies the vocabulary with which the occupation and its content is presented, is far from this everyday reality. The gap needs to be bridged in order to work with youth. You have to understand what adolescents are going through, by leveling with them, attuning to their lived experiences, by pinpointing where they are developmentally, e.g. analyzing their experiences, issues, and

what occupies their mind and figuring out what kind of support they might need to mature and enhance their empowerment.

Furthermore, the focus at the University of in-depth conversations and reflections about the depths of life is hardly relevant, and perhaps not accurate, when you work with youth. A lot happens on 'the surface' instead of what sometimes seems implicit to the interpretation of humanistic ethical counseling at the University. That is one reason I refer to the occupation as 'life counseling.'

Teenagers are still concerned with questions about life; that much should be clear. They struggle to overcome identity crises during adolescence, negotiating who they want to become, shifting through different roles, experimenting with beliefs, opinions, and certain risky behavior, but it occurs at a much more fundamental level than the abstract paradigm seems to imply. This is not an argument against theoretical perspectives; on the contrary, they are important but need to be based on daily practice and placed into perspective. Research should have concrete and practical underpinnings.

Something else I learned at LACY is the value of a community-based approach to bridge the gap between social and educational systems in Los Angeles. Such a community approach provides the population of low-income areas with the necessary resources to improve the probability to emerge out of poverty and take ownership of one's life. Poverty, as I have witnessed first-hand during the months I volunteered, is a serious stressor and is the first component of many challenges and obstacles the members of LACY and their families face. It restricts them to a certain life with few opportunities to emerge from the situation successfully. Empowerment, becoming aware of possibilities, learning how to acquire the necessary resources, and developing essential (social) skills can increase a teen's chances to arise and move past poverty and the limitations it imposes on them.

An interesting observation concerned religion. Although it is an important subject in the U.S., it is also a private matter. In contrast to the Netherlands, where religion and other worldviews form the foundation of certain forms of life counseling, faith is considered a private matter in the U.S. An agency such as LACY avoids being explicit about religion. People ask about the religious denomination you believe in or belong to, but further inquiry is not proper if you are merely acquaintances. In my opinion, one may engage in conversations about a person's values, views and philosophies, and means to make sense of life without tackling a religious institution or questioning a person's beliefs. People in the U.S. are not accustomed to such a view.

8.3 Discussion and Recommendations

On a final note, this study should be discussed critically and recommendations for further research be expressed.

First, the small sample of participants in this thesis means that the conclusions are not representative for all professionals working with youth in low-income communities in Los Angeles. In order for the outcomes to be generally applicable, many counselors and educators should be questioned. The sample is small and therefore not representative. In addition, it is exclusively from one organization, and professionals across numerous different agencies would have to participate to produce data and results that may be interpreted as representative. As stated in chapter five, the conclusions in this research study are suggestions or informed statements and assertions, rather than theoretical generalizations.

Second, the interview questions could have been tested before they were utilized in the official survey, to avoid possible misunderstandings and to gather a larger range of information from the participants. Fortunately, the semi-structured interview questions turned out to work fine. They were able to elicit responses that were valuable, and were able to provide the necessary data for answering the central theme of this research.

Finally, the perspective of youth's themselves would be interesting to supplement the central theme. What are factors teens find important in professional relationships? How do they want to be approached and treated? What makes adolescents feel supported, taken seriously, and cared for? These questions form an exciting foundation to complement this central theme of this study and enhance its credibility.

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Appendix 1: Erikson's Stages of Development

Stage	Task vs. Thread	Age	Virtue	Description
1.	Basic Trust vs. Mistrust	0-2	Hope	Developing a sense of basic trust; this is related to the trust that an infant depends on adequate nurture from parents or caretakers
2.	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	2-4	Will	Establishing the first attempts toward independence and the associated sense of competence
3.	Initiative vs. Guilt	4-5	Purpose	Initiating constructive activities and experimenting with leadership roles in the family and friends group
4.	Industry vs. Inferiority	5-12	Competence	Consolidating a sense of efficacy as a skilled contributor within school and family context
5.	Identity vs. Role Confusion	13-19	Fidelity	Organizing skills, interests, and values into a core sense of self and applying it to present and future pursuits
6.	Intimacy vs. Isolation	20-24	Love	Bringing one's sense of self into intimate relationships with others, typically for the purpose of building a lifelong partnership
7.	Generativity vs. Stagnation	25-64	Care	Utilizing one's social and vocational/professional attributes to make a lasting contribution to one's family and larger community
8.	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	65-death	Wisdom	Accepting one's lifelong contributions and moving toward death with a sense of integrity and peace

(Adapted from Erikson, 1950; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006)

Appendix 2: African American Racial Identity Development

Status	Beliefs and Values	Actions and Affiliations
Pre-Encounter	Adopts many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture; considers Blackness a “physical fact” that plays an insignificant role in one’s everyday life; has not given much thought to race issues; race is a hassle, an imposition, something better left undiscussed; Eurocentric cultural perspective; pervasive belief in U.S. meritocracy.	Seeks assimilation into dominant White culture and may distance him/herself from other Blacks; somewhat dumbfounded and naïve during racial discussions; argues that personal progress is a matter of free will, initiative, rugged individualism and personal motivation to achieve; advocates for an abstract humanist stance when confronted with a race-based analysis; if sensitive toward racial issues, can become anxious over things or people being “too Black” and thus failing to project the best race image.
Encounter	One is “caught off guard” in a confrontation that exposes the relevance of race to one’s identity and worldview; the encounter can be positive or negative but generally forces one to question the validity of an assimilationist stance; begins to recognize own membership in a group targeted by racism	Encounter can occasion confusion, alarm, or depression and often results in anger expressed toward those perceived as having “caused” their predicament (i.e. Whites); “inner-directed guilt, rage at White people, and an anxiety about becoming the right kind of Black person combine to form a psychic energy that flings the person into a frantic, determined, obsessive, extremely motivated search”
Immersion/ Emersion	Transitional period in which the individual demolishes the old perspective and simultaneously attempts to construct what will become his or her new frame of reference; has made the decision to commit herself or himself to change; more familiar with the identity to be destroyed than the one to be embraced; immerses self in world of Blackness, which is often framed as a liberation from Whiteness; some anxiety when one worries about being or becoming Black enough; eventually emerges from the dichotomous and oversimplified ideologies of the immersion experience and discovers that “one’s first impressions of Blackness were romantic and symbolic, not substantive, textured, and complex”	Surrounds oneself with symbols of one’s racial identity and actively avoids symbols of Whiteness; may adopt African names, become intensely interested in African or African American history and engage in a fervent search for inspiration in Black culture; proves one’s Blackness by attaining some sort of group membership, “an audience before which to perform and a set of group-sanctioned standards toward which to conform”; articulated or enacted need to confront oppression; expresses “overwhelming love and attachment to all that is Black” that brings about “selflessness, dedication, and commitment to the Black group”
Internalization	Anxiety over “Am I Black enough?” turns to confidence in one’s own personal standards of Blackness; reconstitutes a durable and steady understanding of one’s identity; may reference a bicultural or multicultural orientation in which one’s concern for Blackness is concurrent with an acknowledged validity of cultural traits gained through nonBlack associations	Rage at White people turns to anger at oppressive systems and racist institutions; urgent need to define oneself against White society evolves into a sense of liberatory destiny that can sustain long-term commitment; dissatisfaction with simplistic thinking and simple solutions; less defensiveness; willingness to establish meaningful relationships with Whites who demonstrate race-critical consciousness and actions; readiness to build coalitions with other oppressed groups
Internalization - Commitment	Finds “ways to translate (her/his) personal sense of Blackness into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment” that can be sustained over time	Able to perceive as well as transcend race as an organizing principle in one’s life and worldview; Blackness is understood as an expression “shaped, voiced, and codified by a particular sociohistorical experience”

(Table 7.2 in: Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006: 136-137)

Appendix 3: Informed Consent

Title: Elements in establishing a nonthreatening professional – youth relationship

Investigator: Vera Schiepers, BA

You are asked to participate in this research study. Please take your time to read the information below and feel free to ask any questions before signing this document.

Purpose: The study will explore important elements used and considered by professionals when they connect to youths' lived experiences and attune to their inner world and level of understanding, in order to establish a relationship with them. It is an exploratory study in which the experience of professional counselors and case managers, working with youth on a daily basis, will be compared to important factors emphasized in literature. At least 6 respondents will participate in this research. The expected end date for this study is July 2012.

Procedures:

1. The investigator will use a semi-structured interview to record the participants' experience in working with youth. The interview will be audio recorded.
2. The interview is expected to take 30 – 60 minutes.

Risks to Participation There are no known physical or psychological risks associated with participation in this study beyond those that are encountered in everyday life experiences.

Benefits to Participants: You will not directly benefit from this study. However, the information obtained from this study may benefit professionals working with youth and students motivated to go into working with youth.

Alternatives to Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from study participation at anytime without any consequence.

Confidentiality: Personal information about the respondent that will be collected during the interview is: age range, gender, ethnicity, job title, and educational background. Participants' personal identifying information will be replaced and encoded by a number. Consent forms will be stored separately from the data. Access to this information will be restricted to the investigator only, and be kept in a locked cabinet. All audio data will be kept on the investigators computer, labeled with the assigned number, for a minimum of 5 years per APA guidelines. No one else will be able to access the audio data. The key to link the participants' personal information to the data is accessible to the investigator only.

The name of the organization where the participants work, will not be used in this study to assure the data cannot be traced back to the respondents.

Questions/Concerns: For study related questions please contact: Professor Dr. W. Veugelers at the University of Humanistic Studies, The Netherlands: phone +31 30 239 01 00; e-mail: w.veugelers@uvh.nl; or by writing: University for Humanistic Studies, Kromme Nieuwegracht 29, 3512 HD Utrecht, The Netherlands.
Or Vera Schiepers: phone (310) 779 4303; e-mail: vera_lynn85@hotmail.com.

Consent

Participant

The research project and the procedures have been explained to me, and all questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this study. My participation is voluntary and I do not have to sign this form if I do not want to be part of this research project. I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.

Name of Participant: _____ **Signature:** _____ **Date:** _____

Name of person Obtaining Consent: _____ **Signature:** _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 4: Summary of the Data

1. What motivated you to go into this line of work?

R1: “I didn’t have the best of backgrounds.” Passionate about “helping kids through the lens of education” because education felt almost like a safe haven to her. “Reflecting on my on past, education was the key to my success and the key for making the changes within myself and also my situation so I wanted to give that back to other students who are in circumstances they have no control over, you are born into your family, you can’t pick them, and try to give them strength to overcome those obstacles and still live an independent self-sustaining lifestyle.”

R2: Kids need somebody to support them, especially in this community where they don’t have a lot of opportunities, they need people that actually care about them; people who do what they can for them. Unfortunately, we have a single parent homes and a lot of these kids don’t have a **father figure** and some of these kids look for that. It’s not something I was looking to do or fill – I didn’t know that until I came here.

... While they’re here letting them know that they have our support, that they have us, that we care about them, that we are here, not to replace any of the parents or family members, but as an extra added bonus to the family circle that they have. So we are part of their family. That’s something that is rewarding being here in this position, this agency, this community.

R3: seeing the obstacles coming from situations similar to some of the kids

Seeing how hard it was. Looking where the obstacles are and finding that some of them are institutional or systemic – encouraging the kids to try really hard, get good grades

Trying to get people mobilized, get parents groups to pressure schools so they have to change

Help the kids understand the perspective of what their landscape is, most of the time we don’t know what our options are. It’s what I’m telling the kids all the time: we have to strive for more, set higher goals. There’s so much more we can get out of life than that. The obstacles are there but just knowing what the obstacles are and how to overcome them – can be simple things like learning how to apply for a job, social skills, what it means to go to college and if you want to go to college what do you have to do to get there. Making things go from pile-high dreams to actual goals.

One of my values is the idea to give back, opportunities were given to me and it’s only right to give back the others – keeping the doors open that were open to me and opening them wider. There is no reason for life to be this hard, kids go through a lot of hardships and one of the reasons I want to work here is to make their paths a little easier and wider.

R4: I volunteered a lot in social justice arenas and always felt that there was inequity and I come from an underserved population. (...) from my point of view there were individual needs that could not be addressed through policy or through government so I believe, as a person who’s had clinical therapy, that counseling could be a powerful tool for social justice and helping people to manage their own lives was the best way to serve in the 21st century.

R5: For me it’s always been.. the fact that it’s very helpful to have someone you can come and reach out to. I was blessed growing up having people who I could reach out to and I want to be able to do the same, I want to be able to help others. In addition, I want to be a role model for a lot of these kids who don’t have a male role model. And to also be that person that may have an influence or impact on those kids. Sometimes we don’t know how much of an impact we have.

Network of support: I wanted to take that role for someone else. That’s why it’s so important to keep encouraging these kids and not give up on them. That’s one of the most important things, not to give up. It could be frustrating or overwhelming, but I think the frustration comes from that we want them to do as we see them but they don’t see that themselves capable of doing that.

R6: I have had a strong desire and need, since I was very young, to help people and help change people’s lives. I saw how much therapy has helped me in my life and also altruistic reasons. In

addition, to enjoy the intellectual and emotional challenge; conceptualizing and analyzing from a psychodynamic point of view.

R7: My background is very similar, I went to similar schools, lived in similar areas, I had similar experiences and had to deal with trauma's they go through here, I understand them and that triggers me when I try to advice, help them navigate through stuff. Hearing their perspectives brings back how I felt and that motivates me and keeps me going.

The similar background builds ground and a starting point with them, so that's definitely I take with me and take serious. I try to use it as a pillar of my foundation, as one of the things I can reach out to whenever I want to relate to somebody or build my understanding of somebody. So the background is helpful for me. I use other things too, but as far as connecting with teens I can use this as a resource.

R8: A child's life and how what happens to them in their developmental years influences heavily what their outcome is in adulthood. I wanted to work with kids for this reason, so I could help them with their troubles when they are young and perhaps some of the issues can be resolved and that would maybe help them in the future. That was my reason to choose working with kids.

2. How do you establish a nonthreatening relationship with youth?

R1: "It is very easy for me, I think because of my background and having gone through some of the things these kids going through currently, so I can relate to them." "Another thing is I'm not afraid to talk about my past with them, so they can understand where I'm really coming from" in order that they can identity with her instead of creating a distance.

Other things she mentions: I try not to lecture and I'm very playful and joking with them. If they make a joke I'll laugh with them so they can feel **comfortable** to come to me about issues. For example talking about sex, which is a really uncomfortable topic for the teens, without me saying things like 'that's not good'. I try to be the voice of reason and say 'let's think about this'.

I feel like the way I create my environment, very fun, very open – I always have an open door policy so they can come in any time – and just really talking to them and giving them the respect they deserve. Talking to them as a human and not an authoritative figure, which is the most important thing. [On a similar – equal – level] I respect their opinions and I respect what they're going through in their emotions.

I always try to make time for all of them and listen and try to give feedback. It is very easy to ask 'how are you doing' and really not care. When you ask these kids you really have to ready to listen. Because 9 times out of 10 they have something they want to say.

So being really flexible, holding them accountable but not punishing them; caring and making sure the environment is suitable for them to want to come talk to you.

I make a note of it [what they have said] so that I can bring it up in the near future. 'hey what happened to that thing, did everything get resolved.' I think with that follow-through they really think 'wow you really do care.'

(...) you have to be open, willing to listen, and be empathetic to the kids.

R2: Unconsciously most of the time, building the relationship. For example, when a new kid comes: just going up there smiling at the child and saying 'hi,' little by little they get comfortable with you, they see that you actually care, because these children are smart, they know if you don't care about them or don't like them, they can tell right away. That's with the little ones.

With the older ones it is kind of similar, but you see them, talk to them as a person. If you try to talk down to them that's not going to work. They deserve to be treated equally and with respect. We're always telling the kids about respecting others and we need to respect them as well. Try to get the best out of them. Let them know that you treat them as a person and they'll come around.

The way you talk to one kid doesn't work for another, the way you build a friendship.... Sometimes this is trial and error – you have to find what it is where you connect, when the child can see 'I have more in common than I thought' or 'he does care about what I have to say' or that when a child gets picked on or staff don't seem to listen, that they see that somebody actually cares about them. You have to find what works with each child.

... Sometimes you have to be firm. When a child is getting into trouble you sometimes have to be firm with them and explain things to them.

R3: It takes time and constant maintenance. It's like a plant, relationships are living growing things and like a plant it takes a while to grow and it's easy to damage it. One day a little bit too much sunlight and you can destroy a plant in a split second. So you have to maintain and groom, takes time and patience. And more than anything it's about sharing a bit about yourself and also listening to them, figuring them out, just being there for them. Constantly being there. Those are the main things to build a relationship. There are all sorts of things you can do in the meantime or help to facilitate that.

Introduction: let them know that this is their space and I just happen to work here; listing the option they have here and try to figure out what they like to do and what they want to get out this space and this program. Pull out what their goals and dreams are and tune into that so they get more invested. A lot of the time it's hard for teens to open up.

R4: I think authenticity is key. Be myself. And I trust that they are respect worthy and they're my equal so I don't use any affectation or hierarchal alignment. I just try to meet them where they are and be genuine. And that's the starting point. And it's a relationship; I just try to have an honest relationship with them.

Q: what elements do you use?

Humor... When I work with individual children I use a mixed-method. I try to listen a lot, try to be present, try to empower them by giving them what I call 'the good stuff' which is warmth and confidence in themselves. So I start first with building rapport. Sometimes I educate myself about their world, what is the music they like, what shows they watch. I try to speak to them at their level. I've learned that children when they feel respected, they will open up to you.

R5: My approach has always been that I don't come across as the authority or the authoritative figure. Obviously I do instill the respect between me and the child. Just be very warming and welcoming to them and hearing what they have to say; giving them the opportunity to really speak their mind, say what they want to say; and always try to end things in a positive way. Reaffirming them that they have someone they can come and talk to if anything happens.

Q: how do you end on a positive note when a part of your role is behavioral interventions?

For me it's always making them see that it is a learning experience and that we're not all perfect and we all make mistakes and that's ok, but we need to learn from those mistakes; and that they're capable of doing better. I go over whatever the scenario or situation was and have them approach it in a different way, a way it would not be inappropriate; continue to let them know that they have the ability to make those corrections (or alterations). Also, if they come to me for inappropriate behavior, the first thing is I let them know they're not in trouble. Because if they think they're in trouble, anything you say to them is already irrelevant to them; they are only thinking about what their consequence will be instead of really processing what went wrong in that situation. For most of the kids, the first time they have an occasion with an adult is when they've done something bad, not when they've done something good.

R6: It very much depends of the age of the kid. Under 11/12 years I'm presenting in a much different fashion than with teenagers.

When a little kid comes in for the first time I just play with them and offer and attempt to offer kids what I think every kid needs and wants for their maximum development that they might not be getting in other places: to feel heard, to experience being seen, to be very present with the child, to experience what the child is experiencing and let the child know I'm there with them, to have fun, and develop a trusting and confidential relationship in which I'm eventually holding the child (containing a child; and this has an impact on the development of the child. It feels very safe to them so they're able to have some freedom in terms of their expression and their playing but it's within certain parameters that they feel contained).

Then for teens, I meet them closer to where they're at. It's more of a challenge for me, but I come in and try not to be at a superior level, again offering or attempting to build a trusting relationship, where they know that what they're saying is confidential. Establishing rapport through empathy. I have some knowledge of contemporary (popular culture) but it's always changing, so I don't come in pretending to know who the newest artist is or something like that. An awareness of knowing popular culture helps for sure.

Q: you said meet them closer to where they are, what do you mean by that?

So not creating power differentials like a teacher and a pupil. Obviously we're not peers, but I attempt to make it more of an equal relationship, because I think that that helps foster trust.

Also having faith in the kids that they can make good choices and do the best that they can with support. Saying that, but I think they can also feel it, it often comes across in your manner, the way you look at them, the way you feel, they're sensitive to that.

Q: how do you approach them?

Positivity, empathy, without being condescending, and always holding in mind that a lot of these kids have had really tough starts in life so that needs to be taken very strongly into consideration too, also with the mind on the future, how can I help this kid to be the best that they can be and equip them for the world.

R7: The first thing I do is I try to be as welcoming as possible; I try to come in with a smile and a warm attitude towards that person. I try to be as nonjudgmental as I can. Whenever I meet someone or am introduced to someone I try to focus on them, definitely eye contact is very important to me, and I try to see their responses to my initial introduction. That's the start whenever I try to connect to someone, understand that there can be some nerves or anxiety and that comes from my background as well. I have to deal with those feelings too, my own anxieties.

After that initial 15 to 20 sec introduction, what happens next is developing discussion points, identifying what the teen needs help from me on and also establishing the rapport. I try to be as open as possible to develop rapport and a relationship. I have them lead the discussion. When the relationship is more developed you're able to talk about different things. That's in terms of long-term one-on-one counseling.

I think it's important for them to understand the role I have so I try to give them a heads up on what I do and why I'm here tell and then move from that.

R8: First and foremost I start off telling them the official part of the therapy. A lot of the kids worry that I'll tell their parents, so it's important to gain their trust and one way to do that is to make them aware of confidentiality and I level with them so that they'll understand, for instance I say 'when the door is closed everything you tell me stays between you and me' only time to break that is because of 3 rules (mandated reporting).

First meeting I ask them what they want to tell me about themselves. That tells me what their comfort level is, helps me gear up for the next question (why do you think you're here? How can I help you? What's going on?). For some kids they relax and open up, others shut down. We play games in the first session: painting together. This shows them that I'm not observing or watching them, they don't like that. If they see me with just as dirty hands as they have it helps to build the relationship and trust.

3. *How do you connect to the level of understanding and lived experience (inner world) of youth?*

a. *What is the difference between connecting to kids and teens?*

R1: (...) the way I approach them, talk to them, the language is the same.... I guess with the college students I use more pressure because they really need to get it together, but then I apply the same pressure on the high school students because this is the time to get ready for the future... I never really thought about it.

R2: The younger kids I feel they need more attention; they want to know that you're there for them. They come in to get your support and attention 100%. If there are issues at home, they are willing to

talk about it. For the most part with little kids it's easy because they want to be friends with pretty much everybody.

Teens: You can't force them to do anything, you can talk to them when they're ready. If you want to build that relationship you have to take gradual steps. Sometimes it'll happen right away, other times it'll take you a while to build that trust.... You have to be patient, not like with the little ones. When something is going on at home they don't want to talk about it because they know there'll be consequences at home if they disclose that. They know that they need the help but maybe they don't want to share that.

"Help them to do their best and reach their potential, or as close to that potential as possible." For the most part kids are willing to engage.

I think I have the patience to talk to all of the kids. There have been instances that other staff get upset and they start raising their voice to the kids and I had to step in and remove one of the teens from that scene and I was able to have a good conversation and get some information to help him that time.

It's similar to the little ones and a different. They need to feel you care about them and at the same time give them a little more space.

R3: I work with the teens and young adults, age 14 to 20. There is definitely a difference between the 14-16 year olds and the 16 and up. Folks that are 16,17 or up are really thinking about stepping into adulthood and stepping into all the challenges that come with that. Being taken seriously as an adult. The way you relate and talk to them is a bit different, they're more likely to open up about what their goals are and what they want to do or the fact they don't have them. They're just more connected to it and see the value of it.

Folks that are younger know that they're not kids but they haven't embraced fully the idea of stepping into adulthood. They're making that transition from, kind of advancing passed being a child to stepping into adulthood. So the way you relate to them is a little bit different.

I have to encourage younger kids to believe that they have power agency in their life, and the older folks I have to encourage to grab on to the agencies they've already accepted and use it towards their goals 'you know what you can do and what you want to do' and really map that out. Basically telling the older ones to do what they want and the younger ones that they can do stuff

R4: I think I have to listen more carefully to middle school-ers. It's not that easy. It's very easy with the 8-10 year olds because they are very straightforward. I think the complexity starts to enter into the middle-school age. And then the teens are, even when their identities are always shifting and changing, at least you can identify it for the day, like 'today I am the rebel, tomorrow I'm the artist' They may be shifting, but for me it's a little easier to pinpoint where they are in the trajectory. Middle school-ers they haven't made any decisions yet on how to be it seems to me. I love them at all ages but I find that the middle school-ers are the ones where it takes a little bit more skill to pinpoint their needs.

I use my intuition. That's an important resource to me, how I feel. So I think as a clinician you do need your skills and your training but you also need to trust what you feel when you're in the room with someone and it's my intuition that I give a lot of consideration. That's one part of it.

The other part is, I think if you are patient and you listen and you ask and probe them, they will tell you, they open up if they feel that you're genuinely interested in them – as we all do.

Q: is there something special you do to provide a setting they can feel...

Well, as you can see in my office I created a space that I think feels inviting. I use fragrance, I have a waterfall, I have color on my walls, I have different things that children like, like a lava lamp. I have these portable sand trays that they play with, I have a lot of different knickknacks on my desk, I have things like conversation pieces so it opens them up, and I keep that teddy bear for kids that are scared. The little ones are sometimes scared so I give it to them to hold and I mirror to them when I'm afraid too so that they can feel safe. So I use a variety of symbolic things to create a sense of safety and comfort and also transformation because it doesn't feel like home and yet it is homey. They know that they're not at their home; sometimes kids will say 'I wish I could live in this room'. I think having beautiful things means something to them.

R5: With the kids that are aged 8-10 you can use more the emotions or the sentimental aspect of it (for example how words can be hurtful), use feelings as a way to communicate whatever they did that was inappropriate. With the adolescents, or the kids that are a little bit older, you need to give them more of a rational explanation as to why what they did is not appropriate.

And regardless you always need to use an example for them, so they can really see how whatever happened during that situation can be applied to a different scenario, and put it into perspective. But typically I think it's also reminding them that whatever they did was disappointing, because a lot of the kids, especially between the age of 8-12, they don't want to disappoint any adult. So the moment you say that, they really internalize that and it has an impact on the way they perceive what they did or to generate some different thoughts as to what they can do different next time.

... With teens it's more rational I think, but based on their day-to-day experiences; try to use those as ways and means to show them or explain to them what they've done wrong and how people perceive them for whatever they're doing. A lot of the teens don't really see their roles as being adults yet so they don't realize the impact they have on younger kids so still feel it's appropriate to mimic or have the same conversations they had as kids... they have more responsibilities and are more held accountable; the expectations of them are set higher.. but it's really on a case-to-case because it depends on their developmental stage. They can be technically 18 or 19 years old but not thinking or behaving at that age-level, due to their childhood, the way they were brought up, or any mental health issues; those are things you also have to take into consideration

R6: Differences are developmental rather than age wise... depends where the youth is in his/her development how you connect, talk or work with them. Kids develop at different rates and especially when there has been a trauma or certain kind of parenting can lead to a delay in development. So sometimes you might have a 16 year old coming in, acting at the level of an 8 year old behaviorally and emotionally or even younger. (...) this becomes apparent in the therapy. If there has been early interruption or attachment and/or parenting deficits and/or trauma, it's a pretty good bet that there is an emotional arrest going on from when that could've happened. I have one teen who likes playing in the sand and a 12 year old who thinks the sand is kind of dull, so it's not a chronological vision of how the therapy will pan out.

R7: Yes there is. I think age, ethnicity, gender, maturity level – I know that's hard to measure – and level of comfort, all of that plays a role. I try to be as aware of that as possible. There is a difference in the way I interact with kids based on those dynamics.. a young 14 year old Latina responds to me as a Latino male, differently then she would another Latina or African American staff member, so I try to be aware of that because that is cultural dynamics. With African American kids I've noticed that it's different or Latino boys even. I try to use a cultural perspective. Example: a Latino kid shows respect with his/her head looking down or when they've been punished they also put their head down, a sign of 'ok, I messed up.' African American kid is different, they respond with their head up and they listen to you with their head up and that's their sign – to me – of showing respect.

R8: Big difference between 8 and 10, 10-12 gigantic difference. 10 year olds are more aware of consequences, more socially adjusted; 8 year olds are more impulsive.

I start with 'what do you do when you get home' tells me who is in their house, what's going on, not just listening also observing.

b. Is there a difference by gender?

R1: No. I honestly don't think so. Of course the conversations are a little different sometimes. When I talk to the ladies I'm always talking from personal experience. When I'm talking to the fellas about girls I'm coming from personal experience. But I talk to them with the same tonality, with the same purpose. And it's not to tell them what to do but to more so guide their thinking and their processes. It's more how they interact with me. So the boys... a lot of them look at me like a maternal figure, some of them call me their second mom, or big sister. ... They are looking for a maternal figure and the girls are looking for a friend and not so much a mother figure. So I think there is a slight difference and the guys are a little more 'joking' they're very open with talking around me, especially

when it comes to girl problems. The girls are slightly more reserved about dating... on other topics... they're all fairly open with me.

I approach the situation the same; I can only be me.

R2: With the boys and girls is pretty much the same. They come in and talk to me. It depends on the situation if it's harder to build a relationship [with a girl], on how they feel about talking to a man/male. I don't have a problem discussing any topic, but most of the time it's the boys that come in with questions and needs about things that I cannot discuss with the girls that's why we have female staff in counseling or teen program. I think I know what I can discuss with the kids and where the boundary is.

R3: There is a difference, based on the way they respond, interactions... girls are generally speaking more communicative, bit more mature at this age... Some of the issues that come up are different, gender based... but overall the approach is pretty much the same

R4: There is more of a difference as they get older, obviously.

... I think it is probably more difficulty for women to lead boys and young men.. especially in the African American community. So I think learning how to speak to them is skill development. I think there is a certain resistance to being dominated by women imbedded in the culture and I think it might be true also for the Latino families. I use a different way, a more sensitive way to say things to them so as not to alienate yourself from them or make them feel challenged. I do think there is more mindfulness in how I take care of the adolescent boys of color.

I don't have a pre-meditated or pre-conceived way to approach people, I try to stay in the moment, wherever they are, I try to align myself in the moment that's important to my efficacy. Being able to be present and not relying on any past impression or inhibitions of fears... Authenticity.

R5: Yes, boys have typically more difficulty with expressing the way they feel their emotions, typically it's only been a sign of weakness, it's not commonly accepted of the male (identity); so it's a little bit more difficult to attract from the kids.

The girls they're typically – and it's not that I try to continue gender stereotypes – but they are more in tune with their emotions so for me it's been a little easier to approach that and bring that out of them.

It also depends on the age group. To a certain capacity the younger kids show more their emotions, the older ones it's more about their perceptions of how people see them, because it's harder to get in tune with your emotions when you get older. This changes probably at the age of 13 – that grey area when kids start to identify themselves with who they really are and all of the processes that accompany that.

R6: Well, it fairly stereotypical but I guess that's how stereotypes evolve, the boys often present more with issues of disruption and aggression, the girls present of emotional issues or a lack of ability to assert.

Cultural, societal norms and expectation play a huge role in how certain gender roles become ingrained

... if a girl would be in need of female alliance then I would play into that a little bit more. But already in the dynamic, the fact that there is 2 woman or females or a male and a female, that in itself is going to set up the dynamic in a certain way. This is more the case with teens than the younger kids.

R7: Gender for me is hard to deal with; it's a huge difference from my perspective (male vs. female). Sometimes my fear is to be insensitive or impose my beliefs and my way of thinking, just culturally, on other people. So I'm really careful in dealing with gender differences. And also as far as liability stuff, I want to make sure that I am not in any kind of trouble. With girls I try to be much more guarded with what I say and how I say it. I try to just stick to the topics within my role here – school. I don't like to get into other issues.

...yes, being cautious is something that is instilled in me from the moment I started working. You don't know what comments could possibly stir some stuff up. Discussions about relationships, some family history – if they come up of course you talk about it and these topics come up more frequently with girls, but I do come in with caution. Especially in the beginning I'm cautious and when rapport has been established I let that dictate the conversations and how to deal with things. When trust is build.

R8: With boys, they're – depends on there age and why they're in my office – ethnicity is a big influence; you have to know about it. Gender roles within a culture.

Boys don't show emotions 'boys don't cry', sometimes difficult to tell a female

Girls are more expressive, although it can take a while. Some things you don't tell a girl.

4. Do you attune to differences in cultural or ethnic backgrounds? If so, how do you do that?

R1: Well, a lot of the kids I work with here are Latino, and I don't have a lot of experience with Latino kids. But they are very open. I ask many questions... I tell them 'they're as much a teacher of me as I am to you' So they teach me about the differences in their culture, the food they eat, the holidays they celebrate, words they use that I don't understand the meaning of, they're always very helpful and open. Because I say 'hey I don't know or understand that, can you teach me' it creates a level that of being able to relate.

... the issues are the same: kids are dealing with educational issues, problems at home, alcoholism, drug use in their home, boy-girl dating problems.

R2: That is something, you have to keep them in mind, even though you can say I'm colorblind or I don't see race. It's true, I don't treat a Latino child different than an African American kid, but there are things you need to be aware of. ... you have to make sure you understand the background and the dynamics of the family before you work with them so you gather some information beforehand so you know what you need to talk about or how best to deal with the family.

R3: In the broader scope of things race, ethnicity, and nationality have an impact and there are so many other things that affect that perimeter, that are also very crucial too. Basically I deal with this like getting to know the kid. Some kids go to church regularly for example and that has a huge cultural influence on them, or some kids don't speak English at home and they're only been in the States for the last 2-3 years and have to learn English as a second or third language.... So it's really considering all the variables and factors that affect those things.

Sometimes *not* being Latino and actually trying to speak Spanish the best I can shows/is a sign of respect and people appreciate that like 'wow he's really trying to communicate with me...on my terms' that's nice, I acknowledge you and I value you... On the flipside of things, you would think it is easier to relate to someone with the same ethnicity but it happens, not all the time but sometimes, that you take on the role of someone else in their lives or for example I represent Black male identity to other Black males, a Black male authority and that might not be pleasant for them – they might have a bad relationship with Black male authority, an uncle or father or grandfather or whoever. So all of a sudden I have to box out of it and redefine what it means to be a positive Black male in someone's life. Especially in cases where they have minimal roles of Black males in their lives. Sometimes it might be viewed as an asset – which in the long term picture when the relationship is developed it can be – but initially it definitely can be a challenge.

R4: I think that the youth culture is a thing onto itself that's driven by popular culture in such a dynamic way with the Internet and TV. So all of these kids share a commonality. I think in dealing with the parents I need cultural sensitivity and cultural competency. But the kids are pretty much all on one accord. They listen to the same music, they watch the same shows, talk the same way, eat the same things, regardless of their...

I just accept that as the power of popular culture. And I attune to that, I let them teach me and there are times I use it as a metaphor. I use basketball to talk to the boys or baseball; whatever their world is inhabited with I try to make use of it.

R5: When a kid doesn't make any eye contact that's a sign too. Could be related to culture, in some cultures you're not allowed to look adults in the eye because it could be a sign of disrespect, for other cultures it is a sign of respect. You just have to be as open-minded as you can and take the person as a whole and see where they're coming from: their culture and what is expected from them and considered normal – for instance, in some cultures they won't talk about what is going on because it's considered a taboo. In that regard, you have to try harder with the child. Always keep in mind what their culture is, what is considered normal, and really see the child as a person, because sometimes they don't associate themselves with their cultural background.

Working here, due to the fact that it is pre-dominantly Hispanic or Latino population, gives me an advantage in a sense, but at the same time – and I don't know if it's me being too critical of myself – people from your own ethnicity not always consider you a professional or counselor, so they don't really give you full credit that you have the knowledge/experience in this field. It has been beneficial that I'm able to speak with them in their native language (especially the parents). And for me, being a former resident of this community, has given me a better understanding of the different barriers and challenges they deal with.

So it has been beneficial... but part of my personality is that it seems that I'm approachable and that obviously allows me to build rapport with members and parents a lot quicker. I approach everybody the same way, I don't see any difference with Latino members or other (African American) members... co-workers with a different ethnicity seem to work with the same group of kids I work with so I don't think there is much of a difference.

R6: I think it's beneficial. The fact that I'm not American I think really helps, because I'm not just another white person. And considering the racial history of this country, especially the African American racial history has very deep implications (...) It's a funny thing in this country, race. There is a resentment of white people and there is the desire to be like that.

In terms of the parents, and this is cultural rather than racial, there is this thing that I'm the professional and have qualifications or skills of a superior profession. Although I'm really not that kind of person and I try to make myself accessible, it is a factor. Especially with the Latinos, the only exposure they have with white people is usually that they work for them (cleaning houses, looking after the kids, or gardening).

I think the kids have less of an ingrained message of what race is and the new generation thinks differently about than the former ones. While I say that it's still really true that they notice skin color. Even within this community they prefer a lighter skin to darker skin and they will tease each other. So there is this value put on lighter skin. I would like to think that overtime the relationship supersedes any racial ideas, I don't know if that's correct or not.

Disadvantage: however hard I work to understand different cultures I will never get it like they do. Even white American culture, when you're not born and brought up here, you're not of it. It can be a very subtle thing. I notice this more with parents than the kids. And there are little cultural implications I don't understand as well. But kids respond more to whether someone is happy or sad than skin color

R7: I do notice a difference but it's hard to measure. I tend to be a little more direct with Latinos for some reason; with African American kids I try to be a little less direct. I don't know why, but it tends to be more effective this way..

What do you mean by being direct?

Being as straightforward as you can be. Example: 'how are your grades?' As opposed to 'so tell me about school...'

R8: Be aware of cultural differences, educate yourself.

5. *What is most important to you while working with kids from this community?*

R1: There are a couple of things:

1) that they see me as a mentor or a source of support, like I want to be these kids' number 1 or at least top 3 fan and encourage them;

2) I want to be able to strengthen their own sense of self-advocacy and independence, I want them to develop their voice and make a statement in this world and know that things don't just happen to you, that you have control over your life. Don't let everything that's going on in your universe effect what you want to do for you life. Encourage self-advocacy and not making any excuses.

... Things I try to instill: determination, work ethic, follow-through, and communication is key.

There are so many things our kids aren't getting at school or at home that we try to provide here. And I can't do it alone it has to be reinforced throughout the entire agency.

... These kids don't see the future, they don't think passed the next day – if that far. They don't do any kind of goal setting; they don't foresee themselves in the future being successful. Teens here think 'if I don't try I don't fail' but I tell them 'if you don't try you won't succeed'.

It's about constantly get them to think forward, you give them a goal sheet and they say 'how am I supposed to know where I'll be in 5 years?!' Well, you don't know, but if you plan for the future it may happen. If you don't plan then the wind will blow you around.

(...) They don't have the example, they have hard workers as examples but they don't know they can take it to the next level if they do what they need to do now. For some of them it's like 'I'm going through high school cause they're telling me to' but they don't know what high school can get them, they're not looking at career options. So it's sad...

They say 'no' to opportunities without being informed. Not knowing what they're missing out of but not wanting to move, not want to do the extra work, not wanting to be taken from their comfort zone. Says a lot of the community. Some of the parents are just saying no without being informed and the kids are disserved by this. Not even thinking about the opportunities, not wanting to seek out opportunities. When we're presenting jobs or study abroad options, or setting up competitions to make some money and travel, they're not interested. They'd rather sit and watch TV. And that's what they've been conditioned to do.

If just a couple of kids succeed they start giving the example so it starts infiltrating in the culture here. That's what we're trying to do. {peers} encourage the other kids to get involved. ... so they feel they have a support group of friends, adults and mentors, and parents. That's the only way it's going to work

.. provide the tools and space... and I can provide nuggets of knowledge that can spread like wildfire. That's the plan.

R2: I would like for all of them to prosper, to have a better life and achieve more. Since our schools are failing them, the agency might be able to fill in those gaps. I wish there was more for the kids, other places to help and more money for this. The school system is terrible.

R3: The most important would be for the youth in this community to feel empowered and that they feel that they have options. To have options and feel empowered to take and explore those options. To feel like they have ways to change their lives and to know how to go about doing the things. (...) A lot of the time we don't know our options. I just want these kids to know what their options are and that way they can really expand beyond that [and choose from the variety of available opportunities].

R4: Their happiness; that they know that they're individuals and that they have a right to happiness and to feel whole and supported; that their lives are important, that they are important. So it's important to me that each one of them feels unique, valued, and precious. That's the most important to me.

Q: and how do you establish that?

I tell them, I tell them every chance I get, and I treat them like they are special – I try to. And I listen to them. I think one of the most underrated things we can give to each other as humans is our undivided attention. When you pay attention to them it matters. Many times when I tell them I've thought about them over the weekend or after a vacation you can see their faces like 'really?!' So I think that is the most important thing we can give each other, our time and attention.

R5: There are two things: 1) for them to feel that they have a place where they feel safe and can come and talk to someone without being judged or without having to worry about what people will think about them when they did or experienced something; 2) having the kids feel empowered, that they have a voice, and when they use their voice it is counted for (it counts). Typically, as adults we minimize what kids say and don't really listen. I think we have to acknowledge that kids do have a voice, they see things in a different way and we need to open to their point of view and see where the kid is coming from. It does take time but the lack of attention to kids makes them feel that they have no voice.

Those are the pointers for me; providing them with a place they can speak their mind and a safe-haven where they can talk to someone and can reach out to someone.

Q: how do you make kids feel empowered?

Reaffirming that what they're saying is important and encourage them to speak how they feel or think so people can hear them out. It also allows them to communicate better with their peers. And letting them know that someone isn't right just because they're an adult. That gives them the opportunity, not so much to challenge an adult, but to begin question what's being said or taught is appropriate.

R6: Equipping them with the skills, self-esteem, and capacity to be able to lift them up out of poverty; so to change their lives and the ones around them. Empower them.

Where possible I try to let the kids know that there are other ways, other perspectives and that they can be the best that they can be. Showing up and ready to get down in the trenches and do the work with the kids.

R7: Being an active listener with kids. That's my main thing, I try to listen and be as understanding as possible. To be honest there is not a lot of advice I give, I try to help them navigate through it and be there with them. My goal is obviously to facilitate that moment of clarity and moment of self-awareness. That's my goal. And also I try to tie in the importance of relationships and others, with every kid that I meet. I try to help them identify support systems they have.

R8: The kids in this community don't have a lot of hope. They don't think they'll live beyond their 21st birthday. They're smart, but they don't have the resources, lack parental support, incarceration. I believe every child should have the same opportunities. So I want to instill hope and be there for them, regardless of parental support. Offer them something constant. Tell them they have options. It should be their choice and it should be the same choice that everybody else has.

6. Could you describe your image of the "perfect" counselor/case manager/staff member for working with youth?

R3: My ideal is someone who is very patient, someone with fairly thick skin, someone who can communicate really well. Someone who has knowledge of youth culture, you don't have to know everything but you have to know what youth are relating to, what they're living through and someone that has the desire to keep on top of all that too. Youth culture is ever evolving and it's important to be plugged in to what's going on.

And really having the heart and desire to get in there and change things and be a positive role model. Also someone who has the ability to being a leader in the sense that... know how to tell them 'yes' and 'no' and 'wait'... those are powerful things. Most of the time we have people that say one of those things all the time but not all three of them at different times when it's appropriate.

R4: My father. He was nonjudgmental, accepting of all of us, without bias. He is a true humanist, has a love for learning, a love for children. His eyes, I remember his eyes would light up when he was playing with me, my siblings or nieces and nephews. For me, I watched him get into the world of any child, get into my world, and he would position himself as a fellow journeyer in my imagination or whatever... a very noble person, an example.

R5: it's about being approachable, open-minded, being a good listener, being patient is also very important; hearing everybody: the kids, the parents, the adults or other staff; and not making any

conclusions and reflect back what they've just said. Just making everybody feel that they can come and talk to you, that you're there for them.

R6: Somebody who is kind and empathic yet has the ability to be firm and keep a boundary. Someone who has the capacity to be lighthearted and fun; definitely not someone to strict or authoritarian or mean; someone who is capable to provide children with what they need, so that might be more structured for one child than the other; meeting each child where they are; and almost tailoring our response in a chameleon-like way to give them what they need because each child is so different. But most of all believing in the child and being positive with the child so they have a good experience when they're with that adult.

R7: Someone who challenges the kids they work with, someone who's not afraid to challenge themselves in that relationship, and be self-aware. Those things are really important. The skills that you have to develop is being self-aware, being cognoscente of your own background, influences, biases, and perspectives. Those skills you learn by experience and also by talking it out with fellow staff members.

R8: Somebody who has the education, someone who is aware of the clinical aspect, what child development is and what it entails, what the different developmental milestones are. Someone who is multicultural aware or open and someone who has a lot of love, you need patience. Listen to a child, you have to level with them. It's not about you, it's about them.

7. *What is most important to you, in your experience, when you want to establish a relationship with and connect to youth?*

R3: I think developing trust is really important; Patience; Acceptance: whether they conform or not that they can feel accepted either way, it's not about a judgment thing, no rejection attached to things. Also holding them up to standards, having expectations of them, high expectations. Expecting good things of them. We can do all these things but if we don't expect anything from them...challenging them. A lot of the time you can see things in people that they can't see in themselves.

Building trust: It's kind of an art form, not a science, but I think it's about consistency, follow-through, acceptance, stability.

R4: it's true across any culture that it is relational. When people feel safe in relationships that's when you can help them.

Most of the parents when they start to loose their kids it's because they're not adapting. Kids change all the time, they become individuals. So if you have to be flexible and parents have to be fine tuned to adapt to that. Give them the right change.

R5: Getting to know the child, asking questions about their day and what they really like to do, getting to know where the kid is coming from. And a lot of it comes down to having a conversation with a kid that you would have with an adult 'how was your day?' 'what did you do?' 'how are you feeling today' and if something is wrong and ask them how come they are feeling like that.

A lot has to do with personality, that's a big factor. If you're friendly with them, say hi to the on a daily basis that helps as well. Not only approach them when they've done something bad, also approach them when they've done something good.

And no need to raise your voice, don't call a kid out in front of others, shaming a kid.

Building trust: That approach, be accessible, see if you can help them out, if they need to speak to someone, if you need to take further steps to make sure that the kid's ok. Part of building trust or rapport is letting them know that you care about them and you want to make sure that they're safe. Make them aware of the fact that whatever happened or is going on, it's a phase that's going to end and there is hope and that we're here to help them out and they have the ability to make a change.

(...) Being consistent, don't make promises you can't keep because kids will remember you for that. Not judging them is important too. Be patient, hear them out, be there for them. We become role models for the kids and model values..

R6: Being present, patient, taking adequate care of myself so I'm in a rested place and look after and tend to their needs, seeing each child not as the behavior they have but as a whole person that has adapted to their own environment by doing a certain thing. So looking beneath whatever the exterior might be.

R7: Active listening; a lot of reflection to get a sense of where the youth is coming from; a lot of praise, positive reinforcement; confronting kids – gives them a sense of accountability; not being afraid to tackle the big issues; motivating; having a positive regard for everything; and when someone comes in with a negative feeling just listen to them, be nonjudgmental and say 'I can see where you're coming from and that this can be negative; also helping kids become self-aware.

...

I think it's important to consider the community itself, the trends, the systems the kids come from, the ecological perspective.

R8: Honesty; unconditional support; respect; a lot of patience – it can be challenging sometimes; have a big heart; and don't let things get to you, be able to let go, self-care, find an outlet; keep it balanced; education; experience.

